

DANGER MOUNTAIN



ROBERT M. MACDONALD



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DANGER MOUNTAIN

STORIES FOR BOYS

Uniform with this Volume.

By ROBERT M. MACDONALD.

With Coloured Frontispieces and other
Illustrations by ARCH. WEBB.

CHILLAGOE CHARLIE

THE SECRET OF THE SARGASSO

THE MOON GOD'S SECRET

THE GOLD SEEKERS

By HAROLD BINDLOSS.

With Illustrations by EDWIN MEGARGEE.

THE OPIUM SMUGGLERS.

LONDON: T. FISHER UNWIN.



THE CAPTAIN AND FRENCHY HELPED VIC CHARLIE INTO THE LARGEST CANOE (see p. 247).

DANGER MOUNTAIN

A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN
UNEXPLORED NEW GUINEA

BY

ROBERT M. MACDONALD, F.R.S.G.S.

AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET OF THE SARGASSO,"

"THE GOLD-SEEKERS," ETC.

WITH 13 ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARCH. WEBB

LONDON

T. FISHER UNWIN

ADELPHI TERRACE

1911

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DANGER MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER I

ESPERANCE VALLEY CAMP

NIGHT had fallen over the Esperance Valley gold-fields in New Guinea, and round the various smoky camp fires the miners were gathered in little groups discussing some matters of evident importance. News had just come in telling of a big strike having been made by a prospecting party far back among the distant cloud-piercing ranges, and as usual the miners were all ready to leave their present payable claims to go out and chance their luck somewhere as yet not defined.

Esperance Valley was the farthest out "workings" in New Guinea, and its population consisted of wanderers from all parts of the British Empire, and some of the hardier restless nomads from other Empires and States. Through the valley a river flowed, and in its sands was found the precious yellow metal which had drawn men from Sydney and Singapore, from London and New

York, from Berlin and Marseilles, and from Edinburgh, Dublin, and Cape Town. Beyond the river stretched a great mountain chain which seemed to bar further progress into the heart of the country, and behind the camp the gloomy, impenetrable forest world dared any to retreat unless in strong bands. Scattered around near and far were native villages, some friendly disposed to the white gold-seekers. All the tribes were cannibals, although some hid that fact as much as possible or found it judicious to pretend otherwise.

But the white men were not cheated. Well they knew the natives and their methods, and they gave them little thought so long as they did not interfere with them, or kidnap and eat more than a limited number of their "boys" or carriers per week. True they had one grievance, but it was against the Federal Government of Australia, which, to its everlasting credit, had laid down the law that in its dominions and dependencies—"Thou shalt not kill." The miners of New Guinea did not desire to kill, but they objected to being killed without, at least, having some argument—with rifles first. Hence the aforesaid grievance. If the white men were speared or clubbed or otherwise caused to "peg out" by the natives, the matter usually ended at that; but if a native were hurt, accidentally of course! the white men concerned had to stand their trial before the Warden

of the goldfields for manslaughter. The miners in the heart of New Guinea knew little of the white man's burden, and cared less, but they obeyed the laws of Australia and of British tradition.

But, like all true pioneers, their memories for grievances were short, and now they were discussing the report just arrived regarding the new strike somewhere among the ranges. There were about a score of camp-fire groups, which meant that a population of about one hundred and twenty gold-seekers formed Esperance Valley community, excluding any native carriers or boatmen engaged in bringing up stores from the coast.

"I tell you, mates, these jigger fleas and mosquitoes are getting mighty bad," one lanky Australian remarked to his comrades round one of the fires. "A fellow has got to stand a lot of cheek from pests in this part of the world for all the gold he gets. What with flying ants, tarantulas, native bees, flies, scorpions, hornets——"

"Give us a rest, Big Sam," interjected another Australian known as Vic Charlie; "you get all them for nothing, and the poor things have got to live somehow. It is this mysterious strike we are talking about now, not politics."

"Well, haven't we settled all about it?" asked Big Sam, relighting his pipe with a burning brand. "Aren't we going to set out for it in the morning?"

"Begorra, it's a moighty good thing for us that these miss katies don't loike the smoke of sandalwood," put in Irish Mike ; "I don't loike it myself," he spluttered, "but I can suffer it better than them."

"Eet ees bad luck zat ve can not have ze smoke vidout ze fire," spoke a perspiring being named Frenchy. "I vondaire how ze poor pests lived before any white people came here."

"Never mind the pests, Frenchy," said the Captain, a tall Englishman with a fierce-looking moustache, who was supposed to have a past. "It's this story of the gold deposits up on the German boundary we are chiefly concerned about. Come back to the main point, boys. Are we going or are we not? "

"If you can say where the place is, we are going," spoke Macalister, the last member of the group, "but as yet I canna admit that we have heard enough to justify us in believing that the story is true. Where is this remarkable land o' gold? Who found it? And what knowledge has any of us got about it? "

"You are too slow to catch even fever, Macalister," Vic Charlie laughed. "Do you think the place will wait for us till some fellows come back and tell us all about it? "

"Maybe no'," Macalister answered doubtfully, "but it is just possible that the first fellows will no' come back at all. The natives are no' very

tractable beyond the ranges, and I believe they are often gey hungry, and have a decided liking for roast white man."

"Well, that doesn't apply to us, old man," reasoned the Captain; "we are fairly well browned, you know."

"And if they tackled you first, Macalister, they would get a mighty indigestible dinner, and would not want to start on us for a month after," said Vic Charlie reassuringly.

"My man," began the Scot slowly, "I have been out back among the ranges before, and I don't think there is much fear of my being made a dinner; but it is gold we are after and no' culinary information, and I would like to ken what is the sum total o' our knowledge on the matter we have been discussing since sundown."

"All right," the Captain said, "I will sum up everything. This is Sunday night——"

"Now, that is what I call wisdom," cried Big Sam in mock admiration; "who told the Captain that?"

"Shut up!" growled Irish Mike; "this is no time for argufying."

"And a mail from Samarai," continued the Captain, "arrived with old Smith's whaleboat of stores. The mail included the Sydney papers and some Townsville and Cairns sheets and one or two other papers from down south. In them is an account of a big strike having been made in New

Guinea on the borders of the German territory, and also some paragraphs saying that many old miners are leaving Charters Towers in North Queensland and Kalgoorlie in W. A. *en route* for the new discovery. A new Resident Magistrate or Warden has also been appointed, it appears, and should get up here next week some time."

"That means a rush has started to this crocodile and nigger infested country," chimed in Big Sam.

"Exactly," the Captain responded, kicking an inquisitive snake into the fire, "and the question before us now is, should we or should we not take advantage of our nearness to the spot and set out at once? All the camps around us are worried on the same point, and——"

"Wait a wee," Macalister interrupted. "Do these newspaper paragraphs contain all the information there is on the subject?"

"I believe so, as far as Esperance camp is concerned," the Captain replied; "but I have supplementary data in a letter also received this morning from my—that is, an old friend down in Port Moresby."

"Well," went on Macalister, "if your private information is such that you can rely on, I will say no more, but I canna trust newspaper paragraphs altogether. I have been a pressman myself in my time in Glasgow, and I ken how the game is played. The news will be contradicted in the next issue, but we'll no' see it——"

"You are too serious, Mac," the Captain broke in. "The letter I received places the matter beyond doubt."

"Does it? Who made the discovery? And how does it happen that the Australian papers got the news before we did? And are the finders philanthropists that they should spread the information broadcast? And what——"

"Easy a moment, old man," implored the Captain. "The news was given by the remnant of an exploring party who crossed this island, and who returned by a German steamer from Astrolabe, the port of the German territory. They spread the news, doubtless, in the hope of inducing other miners to follow up their tracks, and thus make it possible for them to go back and work themselves. The natives killed their comrades, it seems, and only a very strong party can have any chance of winning the gold. We'll have to dodge the Warden too——"

"Then what is the good of more talk?" grumbled Big Sam. "We can start out at daylight and get ahead of all the other fellows from this field."

"You are in far too great a hurry, my man," said Macalister reprovingly; "there are some matters no' yet settled to my satisfaction."

"Who in thunder wants to satisfy you?" roared Big Sam. "No man has ever known you to be satisfied."

“And no man has ever known Macalister to be absent when any fun did come along,” the Captain put in.

“And I’ll no’ be far away this time either,” Mac added cheerfully. “If you fellows are quite decided upon going out to look for this mysterious Eldorado, of course I am going too. All the same, I disclaim all responsibility, and if we are made into a dinner for some natives, or targets for the Germans, or in any other way receive special honour, don’t blame me. Besides, what about the new Resident Magistrate, as some people call him, but whom the boys will always know as the Warden? He’ll never allow us to go into the heart of Tugeriland with firearms for fear we might hurt the feelings of the poor, innocent natives; and if we don’t carry rifles it is almost certain that Big Sam stew, and fricassee of Frenchy, Captain steaks, and maybe Vic Charlie fritters, will figure prominently on a menu.”

“Ah, well,” murmured Irish Mike, “if the natives also have boiled Macalister none of us will object much. But I am concerned about the Warden though; he’ll forbid us setting out into the ranges.”

“But the old Warden has been shifted and the new one hasn’t arrived yet,” put in the Captain. “So if we clear out at once we can have a more or less clear conscience. As yet the country beyond the ranges hasn’t been barred to the

prospector, and it isn't likely that any messages the new Warden could send after us could catch us to tell us that it is now closed."

"I understand," Macalister grunted. "My objections are removed, and we'll start in the morning, Providence willing."

"Thanks, Mac," cried the Captain. "Now that you have consented I feel relieved of much responsibility. Perhaps we'll get gold, perhaps we won't, but we'll risk things and not complain whatever happens. One thing, if we were not first in the rush and it panned out good, we should kick ourselves badly for being beaten, and I know Flash Harry's crowd are desperately anxious to start off to-night."

"And this new Warden will most likely be an all-fired fool, too," added Vic Charlie. "He'll be some old mummy from Sydney or Melbourne who will die in a week in this climate, but he'll have all the old-fashioned ideas about prospectors being ferocious animals who are not happy unless killing niggers."

"We'll not see him, anyhow," said Big Sam, "for if we get away to-morrow he'll be stuck on some snag away down the river somewhere. The blamed fool hadn't the sense to come along with Smith's whaleboat, I suppose?"

"Then I move we all turn in and try to get some sleep," suggested the Captain. "We may safely bet that half Esperance camp will be on

the move to-morrow, and that when the new Warden arrives he'll not find many of the old boys to listen to him."

"Here's some one coming," interrupted Vic Charlie. "Maybe it's a deputation from some of the other parties."

"No, it isn't, it's only a blamed kid," corrected Big Sam. "I expect he's lost his mother and——"

"Shut up, Sam!" ordered the Captain. "Whoever he is he is welcome to a drink of tea and anything else our little camp can give." The men turned towards the advancing visitor, whom they could hear stumbling towards them, and already inside the firelit zone. He certainly was only a boy, although tall and well formed. He was dressed in the latest Sydney style, sadly incongruous in New Guinea, and he was a stranger to all the men.

He paused and surveyed the group coolly, and then as the men gave utterance to characteristic comments, said: "Good evening, gentlemen. I've got bushed a bit. Can you direct me to Mr. Flash Harry's camp?"

"Blow me, boys, it's a new chum!" gasped Big Sam in amazement.

"Not quite," the stranger responded, smiling. "I've been in New Guinea before."

"But where did you come from to-night?" asked Macalister. "The penny cars don't run out here."



HE PAUSED AND SURVEYED THE GROUP COOLLY.

"Oh, I came up to try my luck. I have a letter to Flash Harry, and I've no doubt he'll look after me and see me right. I'm not much use, I know, but I'm anxious to learn all I can, and I can shoot straight and cook not badly."

"You've given yourself a fairly good character at any rate," the Captain laughed. "The man who can shoot straight and cook is worth more in Esperance camp than the fellow who carries the wisdom of a Federal minister or a Scotch magistrate in his brain-box. But come into the smoke and have a drink of tea. You're the first white boy I have seen in this part of the world."

"And I hope you are here with your parents' full consent," said Macalister, "and havena' done anything at home of which you are ashamed. Laddies shouldna be in this place o' sin."

The youth laughed as he joined the party. "I'm older than I look," he said. "My father and mother know I am here, although they didn't altogether approve of my coming, and if I don't get along all right, I can go back to them in Brisbane. All the same, I would rather be here if I could pull along with you fellows. I really can work, and I am fairly strong." He drank the proffered tea and sat down on an upturned kerosene tin beside Macalister, who refilled his enamelled cup and handed him a slice of damper and a tin of jam.

"Did you say you could cook?" asked Vic Charlie suddenly, as the lad devoured the food. "We're wanting a cook badly."

"He means that he wants to give up his job to any fellow who'll take it," Big Sam explained. "He's tired of being cook."

"And the cook gets a full share of all we make," supplemented Vic Charlie eagerly. "You don't need to go to Flash Harry's camp to be cook. Stay here with us and you'll be among decent fellows, excepting maybe Macalister and Frenchy and Big Sam and one or two others."

"I didn't come up here with the intention of being a camp cook exactly," the lad said. "You must have mistaken me——"

"Don't say you won't take on the job," entreated Vic Charlie. "It isn't hard work, and the boys are easily pleased, and all will give a hand at washing up. I'll teach you all I know, too."

The lad seemed thoughtful.

"You fellows evidently think cooking of more importance than getting gold," he said at length. "I thought that up here one would have plenty to do fighting natives."

"And rescuing pretty maidens, maybe?" Macalister grunted. "You thought that New Guinea was a place for a fancy young man like you, tired of civilised life in Sydney or Melbourne, and that by personal fearlessness, straight aim, and good looks you could win your way to fame and fortune, and play leading part in a glorious romance?"

"Give the kid a chance, Mac," said the Captain.

"We were all young and verdant ourselves once."

"Another wisdom brick!" Big Sam muttered. "Boys, the Captain is getting worse. Now, who told him we had all been young once?"

"It must have been Macalister," Frenchy answered, not quite grasping the subtlety of Big Sam's words.

"You're all very funny fellows," the stranger laughed, "but you are all wrong regarding my humble self. I came here thinking I should have some adventures, certainly, and hoping I should make my fortune; but I never thought of helpless maidens, for I know that any ladies in New Guinea, except some missionaries' wives, are black, and wouldn't appreciate being rescued."

"To cook, or not to cook, that is the question!" said Big Sam, who prided himself on his knowledge of Shakespeare.

"You mean to vas or not to is?" corrected Frenchy.

"Gentlemen," reproved the Captain, "you are forgetting yourselves. Our young friend is our guest, and it is very unseemly that you should make fun at his expense."

"Oh, I don't mind," said the self-possessed youngster, "but if you would kindly direct me to the nearest hotel or Flash Harry's camp I should be obliged. The hour is getting late and——"

"And you told your mother you would not be

out late at night?" finished Macalister, while the others laughed uproariously at the idea of an hotel in Esperance Valley camp.

"Well, not exactly," the lad replied. "She knows I can look after myself; but, you see, I got my feet wet to-day, and I really must change my socks. Could any of you fellows oblige me with the loan of a pair? My baggage has not yet arrived, and I possess only a toothbrush at present."

Macalister looked closely at the speaker, as did also the Captain and Irish Mike.

"You'll find everything you need for the night in my palatial canvas mansion behind the tree," the first-named said, "and you can use my socks, or my frock-coat and evening-dress, including my stiff white shirt, as long and as often as you like, as long as I get the use of them myself for church on Sundays."

"Now you've struck it, Mac!" cried Vic Charlie. "The kid is a new sort of missionary, and he won't take on the cook job because it will interfere with his Sunday service in church."

"I certainly should desire to have the seventh day as free as possible," the young man said. "I have always been used to its being a day of rest during which I could think."

"Could you?" inquired Big Sam. "That's a thing none of us here can do any day of the seven."

"Speak for yourself, Big Sam," said Macalister. "I do some vera powerful thinking whiles."

"Yes, when you're sleeping, old man," the big one laughed.

"And I have a mighty lot of thinking to do, too, often," put in Vic Charlie. "You fellows don't know what it is to make a different stew every day outen some old leather."

"Ah! now I know where my top boots went," cried the Captain in sudden enlightenment.

"Well, you ate most of them yourself," Charlie replied.

"Excuse me, mates, while I take in my spare pair of trousers I washed to-day," said Big Sam, rising suddenly. "I know there isn't much for breakfast to-morrow, and I don't want to lose my trousers."

Macalister glared round indignantly.

"What kind of behaviour is this for the Sabbath evening?" he growled. "And us going to start off on a suicide mission in the morning!"

"There goes the last chance of the kid taking on my job," wailed Vic Charlie. "I'll pay you back for that, Mac. I never thought that you would try to skeer the youngster with suicide yarns, and us only going on a little picnic to collect some mineral specimens, in the tamest bit of the whole old world, too."

"But aren't the natives bad around here?" asked the young stranger, drawing out of the pungent smoke for a breath of pure air.

"The natives bad!" exclaimed Big Sam, and the others laughed. "No, my boy; they're the finest fellows that ever grew, and couldn't do wrong though they tried for a month. At least, so the goody-goody people down in Australia think, and they should know, seeing they've never been here. And the natives like the white fellows too, though it is true that they like them best roasted."

"Dear me!" ejaculated the lad, "this is interesting. Are you men going out among these people?"

"We are, my lad," said the Captain, while Sam and Irish Mike argued whether the youth understood the real meaning of Sam's words or not. "We are setting out at daylight to investigate a district as yet not explored by white men, and which is reported to contain much gold. But it is all fun what the boys have been saying to you. You couldn't come with us because there is probably more danger in our scheme than will be healthy even for a young man who can shoot straight and loves the life adventurous. You see, the law does not allow us to defend ourselves against warlike natives in the only way which would give us a chance, and we are bound to run across many ferocious tribes."

"But surely self-defence is no crime?" said the lad wonderingly. "I shouldn't allow any man to attack me without making it as hot for him as I could——"

“ Good for you, youngster ! ” the men applauded, and Big Sam took it upon himself to add : “ If the other fellow was white in colour it would be all right, but if he happened to be black and sported a ring in his nose, it would be all wrong ; for the Warden would try you for manslaughter if you knocked him out, and if you were knocked out by the other fellow you wouldn’t be interested much. So you see you made a mistake in coming to this part of the world.”

“ Has the Warden power to do what he likes in New Guinea? Surely one white man would never judge another harshly for fighting for his life against natives? ”

“ All Wardens ought to be hanged,” broke in Vic Charlie. “ They only keep back civilisation, and prevent decent prospectors from getting gold. If I had the Warden here now I would—I would—ask him to dinner to-morrow and give Macalister my old shirt to act as cook. If the Warden lived after that—well, he would be a tougher man than any in this camp, for I remember the last time Macalister——”

“ Make nae allusions, you damper-slinging sinner, or I’ll—I’ll——” Like Charlie, he sought for some awful punishment which he might inflict, and at length found it—“ I’ll bring oot my fiddle and play ‘ Home, Sweet Home,’ on it.”

The threat was sufficient, and Vic Charlie apologised, humbly, profusely, and hastily.

"Go slow a bit, boys," said the Captain. "Don't stuff the lad with wrong ideas. The Warden has to do his duty, and although he is king, and judge, after all he isn't jury ; and all I have known have been decent fellows in every way except that they had little or no knowledge of the country and conditions in which they found themselves placed as representatives of the might of the British Empire. The Warden feels his responsibility, and therefore acts differently from what we free and independent miners would do ; but if Mac there were suddenly to be made a Warden, I think we'd find him about the worst ever experienced anywhere, simply because he is so conscientious."

"I dinna ken," Macalister remarked complacently. He had been working himself up into virtuous indignation at the Captain's first reference to him as Warden, but the Captain's astute finish had unarmed him, and he now smiled as pleasantly as his grim visage would allow. What he did not know he forgot to mention ; doubtless, he was pondering over the fact that a Warden's position was not altogether an enviable one, seeing that invariably all his white fellow-men had bitter grievances against him. Indeed, his thoughts must have been wandering in that direction, for after a pause, in which all the men seemed reflectively inclined, he turned to their youthful guest and said : "Laddie, you dinna need to take as gospel

all that we prospectors say against the Warden. He has a hard job on hand and he canna' please everybody. After all, he is the only man who stands between the natives and extermination, for there are some white men who would shoot the poor ignorant heathens without any provocation. It is to prevent that sort o' game that the Warden gives orders which sometimes sadly interfere with the work o' honest miners, like this group here, excepting always Frenchy, who doesna ken what I'm saying and who will therefore no' get angry like some others I could mention."

"But won't," said Irish Mike. "It might need a Warden's court and the Samarai hospital to sort out your pieces afterwards if you did."

The stranger laughed and sat down again amidst the smoke. "What kind of fellow is Warden here now?" he asked; "and whereabouts does he stay?"

"Oh, we're doing without one at present," the Captain answered. "The old one has been removed to some more civilised post down in Queensland, and his successor hasn't arrived yet. We expect him next week some time, and likely he'll be an old grandfather sent up here because the Government have got to find him a billet somewhere. We mean to clear out to-morrow though, so his weighty words barring the new strike will not affect us as we won't hear them."

"And the job of cook is still open," added

Vic Charlie, now busily engaged cleaning his rifle.

“All right, I’ll take it,” the lad responded, “if you’ll promise not to expect too much in the way of fancy cooking and look over other shortcomings on my part.”

“Hurrah !” cried Vic Charlie, throwing his rifle into the air and catching it as it fell. “Now I can show you fellows some things you didn’t know before.”

“Of course, we’ll not expect too much of you,” said Big Sam kindly. “Cook is more a name than anything else, only it is your special duty more than the others’ ; we’ll all help you.”

“And if you show me how to brush my hair like yours, I’ll bake all the dampers for you,” said Vic Charlie magnanimously.

“Very well, boys,” the Captain announced. “We were needing an extra man anyhow, and perhaps a new chum among us will help to keep us civilised. I move we all turn in now and try to sleep.”

“Sleep be blowed !” cried Big Sam. “I want to trot our new mate round the other camps to show him off. Flash Harry will have to take a back seat now, for our mate is easily the dandiest man on the fields.”

“I hope you are not laughing at me,” the new mate spoke. “Really I am wearing the only clothes I have at present.”

"Howling jigger fleas!" laughed Big Sam, "that isn't your patent. We're all doing the same thing. Do you think first-class tailors come to Esperance Valley camp for orders? Macalister is the only man here with more than one rig-out, and that is because he did the storeman out of a couple of flour sacks and made a suit out of them."

"Man, you are as deep in dupleecity as a gem-buying Jew," said Macalister, eyeing his comrade with feigned wrathfulness. "I did make unto myself some articles o' dress for use on special occasions, but did I no' offer you a maist service-able sugar-bag which I also owned at the same time, and which might have made a vera good pair o' trousers?"

"You did, old man, but I swapped Charlie Brown of Flash Harry's camp with it for his spare pants, and he cut up the sack into a bosker table-cover."

"Gentlemen," broke in the Captain, "remember we have a new mate and he doesn't know us yet."

"But I will in time," smiled the latest addition to the camp. "My name is Edward——"

"Then you are re-named while you are our comrade, Dandy Dick," interrupted Macalister. "Men forget their double-barrelled names when they come to New Guinea. I'm Mac, that quiet fellow is Frenchy, Irish Mike is that ugly fellow talking to the—if possible—still uglier Big Sam."

The Captain is boss here—him with the moustache—and Vic Charlie is the man whose job you took on. Now you know us, and we know you, Dandy Dick, and the man who wants to take advantage of your youth and innocence just refer him to me——”

“Or me,” said the Captain, and his words were echoed by all the comrades.

At that moment a great commotion arose in the camp about a hundred yards down the river and voices were heard loud in surprised exclamation.

“What’s gone wrong in Flash Harry’s camp, boys?” said the Captain wonderingly. “I thought all the boys there had turned in long ago.”

“We’ll soon see,” said Macalister, rising. “Come along, Sam, and you, Dandy Dick ; we’ve got to show you off anyhow.”

“Begorra ! they are shouting for us to roll up,” exclaimed Irish Mike. “Listen ! that’s Crinkled Peter hammering on his kerosene tin. What cyan be the matther?”

“Maybe it’s the arrival of the Warden?” suggested Dandy Dick. “There were one or two people came up in the store whaleboat with me who might have been that gentleman. All came off the *Burns Philp* boat from Cooktown, in Queensland, and I feel sure they were men of importance.”

“ Yes, likely camp cooks looking for a job,” said Vic Charlie seriously. “ I know Flash Harry advertised for some in the Australian papers—— ”

“ Roll up, boys of Esperance camp ! ” shouted a voice evidently well known to all the men of the surrounding tents. “ A distinguished visitor is here, and he wants to be introduced to all you grimy gold-grubbers.”

“ Confound it ! ” ejaculated the Captain. “ It’s the Warden. We’re too late in leaving, after all. He’ll proclaim the country beyond the ranges barred to-morrow. The man hasn’t lost any time—— ”

“ Well, it doesna matter,” said Macalister. “ We’ll pack up and go to-night. Send some o’ our most useless men over to represent us in Flash Harry’s camp, and the rest will get ready here.”

“ All right, Mac,” the Captain responded, without the suspicion of a smile. “ Your plan is good. You and Big Sam and Frenchy go over now. We’ll whistle when we’re ready.”

Macalister grinned, but Big Sam seemed somewhat annoyed ; Frenchy had not fully grasped all that had been said. However, the three men walked over to the neighbouring camp and joined the others fast “ rolling up ” from all quarters.

A middle-aged man, with steel-grey whiskers and most determined aspect, was seated on a log beside Flash Harry.

CHAPTER II

DANDY'S SHOT

"WELL, boys, I don't think the new Warden will ever catch up on us now, either personally or by messenger."

The speaker was the Captain, and as he spoke he twirled his long, black moustache complacently. It was now drawing towards the close of Wednesday afternoon, and they had left Esperance Valley camp about midnight the preceding Sunday. They were camped by the riverside, among some pandanus and acacia-palms ; and Dandy Dick, whose name was now shortened to Dandy, was baking Johnny-cakes in the ashes of the camp fire. He performed his duties as easily and as coolly as if he had never done anything else in his life ; and certainly he was a good cook, for Vic Charlie had said so, and he was an authority. Nevertheless, all the members of the camp assisted the youthful cook in various ways ; he had marched with them all day, and even carried a load when one of the "boys" went lame for a time. He had already proved himself to be worthy of Vic Charlie's commendation ; and

although he was very ignorant of most things relating to prospecting-life in New Guinea, his other virtues were many, and all the men liked him.

Thus the new cook was a great favourite in camp already. Meanwhile, he attended to his special work, whistling cheerily, and Vic Charlie and Frenchy acted as chief assistants.

"How far have we come since leaving Esperance camp?" asked Macalister, addressing everybody in general.

"About sixty miles," the Captain answered. "But I don't think we are much more than fifty miles distant from the old camp, all the same. This river kinks round the hills like a snake, and I haven't taken any observation to-day."

"I have!" the cook sang out from the fire. "I borrowed your sextant half an hour ago, and worked out our position to be forty-two miles nor'-east——"

The men looked up from their various occupations in surprise. A man who could handle a sextant was something special in New Guinea—at least, on the goldfields.

"My lad," said the Captain, "it strikes me that you and I should change places. I am not much good as a cook, it is true, but you are probably the better navigator."

"Oh, no, sir, I am only an amateur," the cook smiled in reply. "Your instrument was lying

handy when we camped, and I couldn't resist taking the sun ; the horizon was good and everything was favourable, and—and supper is ready, gentlemen. I hope you will pardon my shortcomings, but really I couldn't find much to cook."

But it was a first-class supper, notwithstanding the cook's apology ; and all dined well, even the carrier boys expressing their contentment in characteristic remarks of a most surprising nature to any one not acquainted with their language limitations. These individuals numbered a dozen, and one rejoicing in the name of Fat Head was chief, and generally responsible for his comrades. They were all coast boys, or supposed to be, and were therefore semi-civilised and non-reliable in danger. They could carry good loads, however, and that was the purpose for which they were employed.

After supper the men sat round the fire and talked and smoked. They didn't gather there for warmth, for the temperature was considerably over a hundred degrees even after sundown ; but in the biting fire smoke the mosquitoes and other insect pests could not live, and in any case heat was only a small inconvenience to all but their new member. He suffered it without a murmur, however, and even hummed an air from some popular opera, while the others added tobacco fumes to that of the pungent sandal-wood branches on the fire.

"I wonder how that Warden managed to get up to the old camp so soon," ventured Irish Mike, after a long period of general discussion. "He must be a hustler."

"We're better here than where he is, anyway," said Macalister. "Wardens are, maybe, right enough in their own place, but I don't think he would derive much pleasure from our company."

"Possibly not, Mac," the Captain observed. "Our conversation would be a bit beyond him."

"And the first niggers we fell in with would eat him," added Big Sam. "I'll bet they'll make a good try to eat us, too. But I don't want to talk of that, seeing Dandy is new to the game of prospecting up here."

"Oh, don't mind me," Dandy smiled. He was no longer deserving of his title, for his dress was now much the same as the others—soft shirt, broad-brimmed hat, trousers, and belt. Most also wore top boots, but it was stockingless feet that filled them. Fat Head had fallen heir to young Dandy's superfluous clothing, and, despite the heat, he wore all the discarded garments and strutted about as proudly as if he owned the entire country.

"What's worrying me," said Vic Charlie, "is, how are we going to hold our ground when we do find the place where all the gold comes from? If the fellows who struck it first couldn't hang out against the natives, how can we?"

"My man," said Macalister, "we'll no' need

to hold out long alone. All New Guinea and the half o' Australia and New Zealand will be near us before we need trouble much about the natives."

"But ees eet not zat zey vill us about trobel?" put in Frenchy, just waking from a sleep.

"Well, we'll read the Riot Act to them," answered Macalister, "and if that doesn't disperse them we'll send word to the Warden that they are obstreperous people, and that he had better come up and reason with them."

"Or you might sing to them, Mac," Vic Charlie suggested. "They couldn't survive that, you know, and the Warden couldn't very well object."

"You are all a bit ahead of time," the Captain put in. "We are not there yet, and I don't see how we are going to negotiate those peaks ahead—they're very steep and much too high for comfortable erection in this temperature. When we climb one, too, we've just got to go down on the other side and begin climbing the next again."

"I don't see much sense in them mountains being there at all, at all," Irish Mike complained. "What is the good of so many needle-pointed peaks when they might as well have been just one big razor-blade ridge?"

"See the Warden about that," advised Macalister, with a grin. "He had no right to allow the hills to dump themselves in front of us."

"But can't we continue up this watercourse and

wind round the bases of the peaks?" said Dandy, suddenly becoming interested in the conversation. "These great mountain cones look as if they were volcanic in origin, and doubtless we'll be able to find a passage along the valleys between them."

"Dandy, you are a decent fellow," Big Sam laughed, "but you don't know New Guinea; and you are as green as a palm-leaf about prospecting, or you would know that you can never do anything in this part of the world in the right and sensible way if old Nature—and Wardens—can prevent you. Now, where do you think you would find yourself at night, or a week after, if you began following round these hills? I'll bet you would be heading south, back to Esperance Valley camp again."

"Not at all," said Dandy. "I understand our course is north and east. Surely we can make headway in that direction, and ignore the valleys that lead south. Besides, once we get through this barrier of isolated peaks we'll be on better ground and——"

"We'll get through somehow," broke in Macalister, "so don't you worry, Dandy. One good thing is that if the Warden sends after us to stop us his men won't get along any better than ourselves."

"I don't suppose he'll trouble himself about us," the Captain said with a laugh. "But I expect Flash Harry and party will be feeling pretty

bad by this time, seeing that we got away in time."

"We didn't save ourselves by much," Big Sam grinned. "If your whistle had been some minutes later, that thing Macalister has got, which he calls his conscience, would have stuck us. The Warden had made his speech, and hoped we would all be good boys and not break the law. And he was talking of the new strike and just coming to the point of barring the whole country against prospectors carrying arms when your whistle called us away, so we never heard any reason why we should not start on our little picnic, and here we are."

"But we need not break any laws," said Dandy. "I am sure none of you gentlemen have any desire to shoot natives."

"I never yet knew a prospector who had," the Captain replied. "But there are people in New Guinea now who are not prospectors, and perhaps after all it is just as well that the law is as it is. But let's turn in, lads. We must get away again at sunrise."

Without comment the men stretched themselves out round the fire, and soon were asleep. The carriers had been in dreamland long ago round their own fire, and the stars of the tropics shone out overhead. Night birds filled the forest which flanked the watercourse with weird sounds; amphibious creatures splashed in a deep pool near,

and emitted strange grunts and barks as they pursued their nocturnal avocations, contemptuously indifferent to the proximity of the white men. The unwinged denizens of the forest—wriggling, crawling bipeds and quadrupeds, and centipedes also—obeyed their instincts fearlessly; and throughout the vast, impenetrable gloom myriads of forms of life devoured myriads of other forms. Truly Nature is inscrutable in her ways—and yet how mighty in the defence of man! If one form of life did not wage ceaseless war against others, man would have no chance to live in the tropics, be he black or white, for the pests would overwhelm him almost instantaneously.

But the camp slumbered peacefully, as indifferent to possible dangers as were the prowling creatures of the night. True, Big Sam and Frenchy had laid a ring of wood ashes around their sleeping-place so as to ward off snakes and other crawling things, and the fire itself was a means of defence against most other animals. It burned lower and lower, and at length Macalister got up and threw on some more leafy branches, retiring again while the resultant smoke hung over all.

But more than Macalister were awake. A few minutes after that individual had resumed his recumbent position, and while the acrid smoke still hung heavily over the camp, the Captain sat up and surveyed his sleeping companions. Next

moment he arose to his feet and stretched himself. Then he picked up his rifle and strode off into the dense forest undergrowths without once looking behind. He evidently was intent on business which he did not desire to be known. A minute later Dandy arose, and, without hesitation, also seized a rifle and started off along the track made by the Captain.

Then the Scot sat up on his blanket and smiled serenely.

"The Captain has got hold of some idea," he muttered, "and Dandy has got hold of him. I wonder if I should join in this game? No ; I'll have another sleep and hear the news in the morning, for as likely as not if I left Big Sam would be on my tracks."

He glanced over at his comrade's slumbering form as he spoke, as if expecting an answer ; but Big Sam slept on, and after a few minutes Macalister lay down again and began to snore. But he was slightly wrong in his conjectures regarding the knowledge Dandy had of the Captain's movements. The boy was unaware that his chief preceded him. He was cook and responsible for the breakfast, and the weight of his responsibility hung heavily upon him.

Therefore he had gone out to find a meal for his comrades, Vic Charlie having told him that wild pigs usually came from their lairs to feed in the early hours of morning. Incidentally, Dandy was

also thinking of many other things, and he liked the freshness of the cool atmosphere, which would become broiling hot again with the advent of the sun.

Meanwhile, the Captain forced his way through the interlacement of clinging vegetation which stretched between the trees, and at length broke out on a well-tramped pad which wound its way along in the direction in which he was going. The starlight was sufficient to enable him to follow this track, and after examining it carefully with the aid of some matches he muttered an exclamation and started down its sinuous course. The Captain was greatly worried, and as he carefully avoided the pitfalls, lined with upright poisoned spears, which occasionally intercepted the track in most innocent-looking fashion, his thoughts were certainly not of a very optimistic nature—in fact, his worst suspicions had been justified. He had seen signs during the previous afternoon which had caused him to think a native village was in the vicinity, but not wishing to alarm his comrades needlessly he had decided to make sure before speaking. This he could only do while they slept ; and now he had done so, for clearly a well-trodden pad could not very well exist without there being people who used it somewhere near. Well the Captain knew that a fight was inevitable should the natives discover the presence of the prospectors, and, as chief of the party and morally

responsible for all its members, he now wished to locate the village so that it might be given a wide berth the next day. He knew his men could easily defend themselves if attacked, but that would mean personal inconvenience of a most unpleasant variety to some of the natives, and at any cost had to be avoided. For was it not to prevent like occurrences that the new Warden had forbidden prospectors to enter the hostile country?

The Captain ran on, and not far behind him was Dandy. The lad was wondering what the existence of a pad meant at first; then he concluded it was a track made by animals between two rivers and that he would doubtless find the camp's breakfast somewhere along its course. But he changed his mind again when he tripped over a long, innocent-looking, fibrous root which lay across the path, and found himself floundering in a pit partly filled with leaves, and in which were implanted ferociously barbed stakes. Some animal had been trapped shortly before him, and that fact saved him considerably, for in its struggles it had broken down many of the vertical spears. Dandy climbed out and appropriated the animal, which proved to be a fair-sized wild pig. He then examined the trap in matchlight and mentally noted the approaches from either side, its general design, its apparent purpose, and one or two other points which struck him as being worth remembering. Dandy was only a youth, but he did not require to be taught any lesson twice.

"This means that there are natives somewhere around," he muttered, "and it is just possible that they may not be friendly disposed towards us. I think I'll go along this pad for half an hour and investigate. I can be back in time to prepare breakfast. I'd better keep my eyes open, though ; I thought Macalister was yarning when he told me about these traps." He resumed his forward journey.

Meanwhile the Captain was nearing the end of his exploring trip. Suddenly the forest vegetation parted in front and he was in a clearing which sloped down towards a river ; a bamboo bridge carried the pad over the rushing waters, and nestling beneath a towering peak which rose almost sheer from the opposite bank was a large native village. The pad evidently was an important roadway connecting the village with another. The Captain stood for some time to survey the place. The village was of the usual New Guinean type, most of the houses being built on piles, half hanging over the river, and the others skilfully constructed in the highest parts of great palm-trees. A stockade of bamboo enclosed the village on three sides, but the fourth was open to the river. The light was just enough to enable him to discern the houses, but no more, and he was glad. If it had been full moonlight, or daylight, he could not escape being seen himself, and in that case serious complications might ensue. Still, he knew New

Guinean ways, and did not imagine that because he could not see any signs of life no guard was kept. But he was somewhat surprised at finding a village where none of the Esperance Valley miners dreamt one existed, and deeming it essential in the interests of white prospectors that he should know what tribe owned it, he moved ahead cautiously to examine it at closer range, hoping to be able to find out who the people were from the fantastically carved and burnt ornamentations surmounting all the chief buildings.

He reached the swaying suspension bridge, and then suddenly and without the slightest warning three naked warriors sprang upon him. He realised too late that he had fallen into the hands of the bridge-guards, and even while he struggled with them called himself a fool with many supplementary adjectives. But the Captain was an extremely powerful man, and he threw one of his attackers from him with a force that caused the victim to remain where he fell. The natives were strong men, too, however, and their naked, perspiring, and odoriferous bodies afforded little chance of grip, and the Captain got no chance to use his revolver, because it had been removed from his belt by one of the men while his comrades otherwise entertained the Captain. And now the struggle waxed desperate. Two powerful warriors, grim and determined, sought to strangle the white intruder, and the intruder did his best to prevent



FOR A MOMENT THE EXULTANT SAVAGE PAUSED WITH
UPRAISED CLUB.

them. The black warriors had spiked clubs and all the other death-dealing weapons of their tribe, and the white warrior had a rifle which at such close quarters was much more useful as a club, and as such he used it. And with effect. The blows fell freely and with force, but the natives were more at home in that style of fighting than was the Captain, and soon his strength showed signs of giving way. At last with a mighty effort of his failing power he broke his rifle on the head of one of his two assailants, and with a grunt that person dropped to the ground, seizing the Captain by the feet as he fell and bringing him down too. The fight so far had been in silence, but now the one remaining fighter uttered a shout of victory and raised his club on high to deal the final blow to the prostrate man. Nothing now could save the Captain, and he knew it ; he had fought a good fight, and it was hard to die in this fashion, but he had done his best. For a moment the exultant savage paused with upraised club to gloat over his helpless victim, and possibly for another reason. At his shout a number of warriors had come rushing from the other end of the crude bridge, and many lighted torches flared all around as if the shout had been a pre-arranged signal to illuminate the place. The club-swinging warrior waited until his torch-bearing comrades were near ; doubtless he had an eye for dramatic effect, and wished all to witness his prowess, but evidently, until the

New Guinean equivalent to limelight was full upon him he did not mean to strike. He knew the fallen white man could not escape, for he was already lying motionless, and seemingly unconscious.

But delay often means the same in New Guinea as elsewhere, and the proverb relating to the many possibilities of an accident intervening between a containing receptacle and the safe destination of its contents was well illustrated in this case. The torch-bearers were now all in position, and the warrior was probably tired holding his club aloft ; so with a shout of joy he gave a final swing and brought it forward and downward with all his strength directly over the Captain's head. But somehow it missed its intended mark and flew from his hands right in among those watching the performance. A sharp whip-crack-like sound seemed to issue from the edge of the clearing at the same moment, and the warrior—now minus his club—began a dance which was not known to the torch-bearers. He also accompanied his movements with most unmusical howls, and held up a wrist which had been shattered by some magical influence. Just then the Captain leaped to his feet, caught the man by the throat, and threw him headlong at his fellow-tribesmen, after his club. He did not stay to explain matters to the astonished natives, who had not known he was a white man until they saw him in the glare of

the torchlight, but ran for the forest at once. None followed ; all were too much surprised, and their shouts would have done credit to several steam whistles blowing in unison.

The Captain lost no time in getting back to camp ; dawn was at hand, and danger too. He rushed in among his sleeping comrades just as the first streaks of sunlight were reflected from the peaks overhead. Dandy was kicking the fire into a blaze, preparatory to boiling a billy of coffee for breakfast, his rifle rested on the blanket on which he had slept, and a wild pig lay near.

"Hullo, Dandy !" the Captain cried, "you're on duty early." His gaze roamed around the camp as he spoke, resting for a moment on each sleeping form.

"I don't want to cause any delay in getting started, sir," Dandy answered, "and I can't yet judge the time required for cooking very well. There is a pig I got this morning."

"I don't think we'll wait to roast it now, Dandy," the Captain said, his surprise growing as he realised that all the men were present. "The fact is we're in a position of some danger, as I have only recently discovered. Was any one out of camp this morning?"

"Only ourselves, sir, so far as I know, and I didn't know you were out until—until half an hour ago."

"Dandy, don't say a word to the boys about my

being out, in the meantime. There are more white fellows than ourselves about here, and there is a native village about a couple of miles distant, and I don't think its inhabitants are friendly disposed to prospectors."

"Excuse me breaking in, Captain," called out Macalister, "but my conscience will no' let me lie here an' pretend I'm sleeping when I'm no'. I saw you both leave camp, an' I saw you both come back; you led Dandy by a minute going out and he led you by the same space o' time coming back——"

"But Dandy brought a wild pig back, old man," said the Captain with a forced laugh. "I've brought only news of impending trouble. Kick up the boys and I'll tell the whole story. After all, they may as well know everything."

Macalister soon aroused all the men, and sleepily they stood round the fire watching Dandy perform his duties, and listened to the Captain's experiences. Their comments when he had concluded were many and varied, and in some cases highly original, but the one point that interested all more than anything else was the story of how, just as the Captain's fate had seemed settled, a rifle shot from somewhere had shattered the native's wrist and thus allowed the Captain to escape. "Of course I thought it was one of you boys who had tracked me up," the Captain said in answer to a question Big Sam asked, "but as none of you

except Dandy were out of camp it shows that there are other prospectors knocking around, and that one of them is a mighty fine shot, and has a habit of rising early."

"Aye," said Macalister thoughtfully, nodding his head. "That much seems vera evident unless——" He turned away abruptly and began giving orders to the carriers. Vic Charlie and Frenchy were now assisting Dandy to get breakfast ready, as coolly as if no possible danger was within a day's journey of them; but Irish Mike and Big Sam were already putting into effect the scheme the Captain had discussed with them, and all were prepared for an attack to be made upon them at any moment. They did not want to alarm Dandy, for he was only a boy and not yet used to the every-day events of the New Guinean prospector's life, so they laughed and joked, and made all preparations. And Dandy laughed too. He had felt a bit hurt at first because not one had for a moment allowed that he might have been the hidden marksman, a deduction which ought to have been obvious; yet he felt that great possibilities were in store if the men continued to look upon him as merely a lad who could cook well but who yet had to acquire experiences in other matters.

All arrangements were now completed, and Big Sam entered the river with the end of a rope round his waist and swam diagonally to the other side. Here he made his end of the rope fast to a tree,

Mike having done the same with the other end on the camp side. A guide over the river was thus formed, and Big Sam then proved its utility by recrossing, walking on the bottom with his arms linked round the rope to prevent himself being carried away by the swiftly rushing stream.

Headed by Fat Head, who had been given a lump of sugar as an inducement to be brave, the boys then marched into the water with their loads on their heads. As each passed Big Sam and Irish Mike these gentlemen hitched him to the guide rope with a running loop of canvas, so fixed that the carrier could have both his hands free to steady his load and still be bound securely to the rope, the loop, of course, travelling along the guide with the man. In time all the boys were safely across with all the camp equipment not then in use for breakfast necessities. Soon after the white men began to follow, the camp being given the appearance of having been vacated after breakfast in the usual way, and in no special hurry. All the cooked food had been also floated across on a sheet of bark, under the direction and personal attention, during transit, of Vic Charlie.

"I see," observed Macalister as he shouldered the wild pig Dandy had brought in and walked into the water *en route* to the other side, "this animal didna meet its end from a bullet. Now isn't that most unaccountable?"

"No," said Dandy, following the Scot into the

water, laden with cooking utensils. "It was impaled in one of those traps you told me about, and I took it with me."

"Then you didn't really shoot anything, Dandy?" went on Macalister. "You must have forgotten my instructions about getting game."

"I saw nothing to shoot at," Dandy replied. "It was too dark."

"Most marvellous," mused the other, struggling forward in the current, "and yet that shot that came in so vera convenient for the Captain must have been fired in the dark."

"Oh, but that was easy because of the torches all round," said Dandy.

"Aye, I thought so, Dandy," chuckled Macalister. "You've forgotten that the Captain never mentioned anything about torches in his story; so I can now understand why there was a spent cartridge in your rifle magazine and why this pig wasn't the result o' that shot. You're a modest fellow, Dandy, and an acquisition to the camp, but you shouldn't hide your light under a bushel——"

"I'm not, Macalister," Dandy laughed. "I'm playing a game as deep and subtle as you could play yourself."

Macalister did not answer at the moment. He had suddenly lost his footing and turned a somersault. But he held on to the pig and also to the rope, and when he at length resumed a natural position his eloquence was of a high order, although

mostly directed against Vic Charlie and Irish Mike, who entreated him to "do the trick again."

The Captain came over last, after disconnecting the rope on the old camp side and fastening it on himself. He made a record passage, for all the men were pulling. As soon as possible all the stores and gear were removed behind some dense clumps of leafy vegetation, where cooking operations were resumed. The men could see their old camp through the foliage, but were well hidden themselves, and now they awaited the appearance of the natives and dried their clothes in the sun. They had not long to wait. Indeed, it seemed as if the natives had been waiting until the white men had disappeared before emerging from the forest and showing themselves. Frenchy was watching, and his whisper made all the men peep through the leaves. One tall savage crept cautiously from the shelter of the timber and made towards the still burning deserted camp-fire. He uttered a cry and instantly the vacated ground seemed to become alive with stalwart warriors.

CHAPTER III

THE NIGHT ATTACK

"I'LL tell you one fair-sized wisdom brick that has just struck me," remarked Big Sam as he crawled forward as far as possible and surveyed the horde of natives running about in all directions on the opposite bank. "It's a mighty good thing for us we're on this side of the water, and no bridge near."

"You'll burst your brain-box, my man, if you wrestle with any more ideas like that," said Mac-alister, "and maybe you're wrong anyway. Maybe those fellows over there have come to invite us to dinner, and I have little doubt that they are vera much disappointed at no' finding us at home."

"I agree with you, Mac," the Captain grinned, "but don't talk so loud or they may find us yet. I know they keenly desire our presence at dinner, for I recognise an old friend of mine over there who would simply insist on our accompanying them did he see us. It looks as if he were the boss, too, from the way he shouts out his orders and his style of hairdressing. That fellow is highly cultured and holds advanced views on some things.

He was educated by the missionaries down on the coast, and one day he killed his teacher, ate what he could of him, and cleared out. He has since become one of the most notorious cannibals in the country. I have met him several times in various mining camps, and twice he tried to send a spear through me. He's as cunning as a Jew store-keeper, and understands English well. His name when I knew him was Beefsteak, and he was then a boy-contractor to the miners of Tamata."

"The villain!" ejaculated Macalister. "We'll send for the Warden, or the police, at once, and get him arrested."

"Me know Beefsteak well," broke in Fat Head eagerly. "Hims bad fellow. Hims once want eat me. Hims no chief them fellows, unless hims kill old chief. My word! Beefsteak been chief many peoples. Hims strong an' know magic an' fight other chief easy. Warriors no' like hims, never. Hims no' good fellow."

Dandy had paid great attention to the Captain's words, but he ceased his work the better to follow Fat Head. He hardly understood, however, and seeing this, or suspecting it, Macalister explained while the others watched the natives on the other side. "You see, Dandy," the Scot began, "among the leading tribes of New Guinea a chieftainship is no' exactly hereditary. A fellow only holds the job while he can prove against all comers

that he is the best man. Now that law is good in some ways, but it has disadvantages. It means that a tribe is always involved in a fight, and that the people never know who their Mamoose is. But it also means that any outsider—I believe it might include even white men or Chinamen—can come along and challenge the reigning chief for his position. Of course if he doesna' win the fight he's done with life, but then in the case o' desperate men that doesna' count, an' in my case, for instance, if I were to fall into those fellows' hands I should challenge the chief right away and thus have a chance to fight for my life. So long as you don't break the tapoo laws, which practically means do something their religious beliefs are against, you always have the fighting chance even amongst the most notorious tribes; so remember my information, Dandy, and have a fight before you go under if you are ever in such a predicament."

"I will remember," Dandy answered, "but the breakfast is spoiling now. Shouldn't I call in the men?"

"Maybe it would be a good idea. I'm feeling a wee bit hungry myself."

The men had now sought out different positions of vantage from which they could view the natives, and as the usual signal to "roll up" could not be given—the beating of a kerosene tin—Mac and Dandy elected to go round and inform all that

breakfast was ready. While conveying the information Dandy kept his eyes on the opposite bank. He felt greatly interested, and though he marvelled that his comrades took things so coolly, he knew they were acting correctly.

In a few minutes the men were gathered in, but while they quietly dished out their food Dandy scrutinised the natives himself through the branches. They were all tall, well-formed men, physically equal to any body of white men as far as appearances were any guide. Their dress was scanty, consisting only of a cocoanut-fibre kilt and an elaborate headdress of feathers. Some also had rings in their noses and a necklet of dog's teeth as additional ornamentations, but these appendages were charms and not articles of dress. All had clubs and long wooden spears, barbed in a manner which showed they were meant to be effective when used. Dandy shuddered as he thought of what would have happened had his comrades not got across the river before their arrival, and he felt that it would surely be no crime to send a bullet through the repulsive-looking fellow called Beefsteak, who evidently was the present chief of the gang. Still other thoughts crowded in on him and he crawled back to his comrades, now dining as indifferent to their environment as if they were in a first-class Sydney restaurant.

"Come in beside me, Dandy," cried Big Sam.

"If the niggers come along they'll find their work cut out for them, so don't you fear."

"Oh, I'm not worried about them," Dandy said. "I was just wondering what our next movement would be. We couldn't very well reason with those fellows over there, I suppose?"

The men laughed. Dandy's simplicity was refreshing in its originality.

"Well, no, Dandy," the Captain said. "These fellows are much the same as the people in Sydney or Melbourne or London. They won't listen to reason when the facts go against their own ways of thinking. All the same I'd like to have the Warden here to try his persuasive eloquence upon them. Maybe he might show them the error of their ways."

"Might he not merely capture the leaders, ask their grievances, and if they had any see that they were made right, and if they hadn't carry them down to the nearest township where they might be taught that the white man is not necessarily their enemy?"

"Look here, Dandy," said Big Sam, "you are a decent fellow and a bosker cook, but you're about the greenest new chum I ever met. The Warden doesn't work as you think. He'd simply order us to go back and leave the niggers thinking they had scared the life out of us. As for getting a hold of the leaders! Do you think that Beef-steak would give him the chance unless he were

going to fight him personally? I know what I'd like to do, and that is to put a nice little ventilating hole in Beefsteak now."

"Which you won't do," said the Captain. "We, in a way, have no right here, and we certainly are not justified in using firearms against human beings who think they are defending their rights."

"Begorrah, Captain," Irish Mike interrupted, "haven't we as much right here as your friend Beefsteak? He does not belong to the people of these parts. He fought for his position, and by the powers cyant we do the same?"

"No," the Captain answered. "We are white men, with all the white men's responsibilities. We have dodged the Warden, it is true, but that does not mean that we have cut ourselves adrift from the unwritten laws of civilised humanity. We'll leave these people alone until forced to defend ourselves. Wash up and pack and let's away, and for any sake don't let our carriers think that we are troubled in the slightest or they'll desert us in a body."

"No, they won't," said Macalister. "I've promised them each a lump of salt and a lump of sugar every night if they do their duties well, and even a semi-Christianised New Guinean from the coast would face all dangers for these luxuries, in addition to his pay and his rice."

"Then hurry, boys, and let us get out of this,"

said the Captain. "We'll skirt the base of this hill as far as it will take us in our direction, and chance finding other valleys when the trend of the main one seems swinging round too much."

All agreed, and soon after everything was packed up and a start made. On the other side of the river the natives were in a high state of excitement, having traced the white men into the river, yet having no canoes to follow them. Beefsteak delivered an eloquent address to his men which, Macalister told Dandy, meant that the ways of the white prospectors were not straight, and that, though it appeared that they had gone down the river he would not mind staking his reputation for veracity on the fact that they had gone the other way.

"Did Beefsteak say all that?" Dandy asked, much surprised.

"He did," he was answered, "and a lot more ; it's most wonderful the amount o' meaning a New Guinean who is master o' his dialect can put into a few sentences."

Dandy made no comment, but he seemed very thoughtful. The Captain led the way, compass in hand, and the carriers and men followed in a straggling line which looked very careless formation, but which really was anything but that. Up the river, keeping well back from the bank, the track was forced, and soon the steep hillside was rounded, and the general trend became westward

instead of northerly. All noticed this but hoped that soon a valley would be found leading more nearly in the proper direction. Meanwhile the river banks were fringed with luxuriant foliage, through which flitted birds of brilliantly hued plumage and of wonderfully noisy vocal powers.

Orchids and other parasitical growths graced nearly all the tree-tops, and yellow, red, and white creeping flowering plants of bell-shaped variety hung in endless festoons from all the branches overhead. The undergrowths, too, were of a nature that could not be ignored; these grew in dense interlacements from tree to tree, and a passage had to be forced through them by sheer strength. Most of these growths were of a wild vine order, and at certain parts where their tendrils intertwined it was much easier to break through. Thus an erratic line, which zig-zagged like the trail of a mighty serpent, was in time broken through the tropical entanglements until a tributary stream was again cut which seemed to wind its way around the mountain bases from the higher regions where the party wished to go. Without comment the Captain parted the creeping vegetation and entered the stream, and in single file the others followed. The current was strong, but the water was not nearly so deep as at first crossing, and all landed on the far side without mishap. Here they halted for lunch and then went ahead again.

And now the nature of the country swiftly changed. They rose through the forests of palms and cedars, and in time found themselves bursting a way amidst clumps of scrub and creepers of more tender growth. Then came a region of still smaller scrub and coarse grasses, and finally they were on the bare black hillside. The zone of vegetation had now been left behind on the lower slopes, but still where the water which they were following broadened out into a pool, scrub and creeping foliage generally fringed the banks. Far beneath the tree-tops stretched away like a billowy sea of white, crimson, and gold, until the view was shut off by the many outflung mountain spurs. Ahead lay the top of the ridge the prospectors were now climbing, but it seemed far, far away. They were toiling upwards at the bottom of a ravine, for the stream which they had been following had now become a mountain torrent, and they were fast approaching its source, where the flanking ridges of the ravine converged.

"I say, Captain," Vic Charlie suddenly called out as he paused to wipe the perspiration from his face, "I have always thought we were half decent prospectors."

"Well, I hope we are," the Captain returned pleasantly, "and law-abiding citizens of the great British Empire."

"That's all right then ; I was beginning to think you thought we were all young Excelsiors,

but now that I know you don't I move we rest and have a smoke. Dandy is tired, anyhow."

"No, I'm not," cried Dandy from the rear. "I enjoy mountain-climbing. I'll not be behind you much at the top."

"We'd better camp among this scrub for the night all the same," the Captain said. "This little picnic is a bigger contract than we calculated, and we'll never get over the summit to-night."

"And what is on the other side of the top, Cap?" asked Big Sam, lighting his pipe.

"Another summit, I fancy, Sam; but I don't think any white man really knows. We are heading straight towards the German boundary, but I fear the distance we must travel vertically exceeds that of the horizontal mileage."

"Vat does all zat mean, boys?" inquired Frenchy. "I no' comprong all ze Capitaine says."

"He means," explained Macalister, "that the actual distance between here and the place where the wonderful gold deposits were found is maybe about twenty miles by an aeroplane; but as we have to walk along the business edge of a saw to get there the travelling distance will be nearer three times twenty."

Frenchy said he understood, and soon after a halt was called on a level stretch of ground by a swirling pool in the creek.

"We really must camp here and recuperate," the Captain said, sweeping the valley behind with his binoculars. "Our next stage will be a hard one, and it is well on for sundown now at any rate."

"Begorra! what twisters of the truth some men are!" muttered Irish Mike, throwing down his load of cooking utensils.

"What's troubling you, Mike?" Macalister asked. "Is it mosquitoes or jigger fleas?"

"An' it's moighty well you know, Scotty," Mike answered with a grin. "The Captain says we'll camp here, but I'll bet he doesn't mean to have old Beefsteak for tea all the same."

"But how could we?" asked Dandy innocently. "I will do my best to cook whatever comes along, but I can't imagine——"

"And don't try to, Dandy," Macalister interrupted. "Beefsteaks are vera difficult to cook in this part o' the world, and the particular kind Mike means might want to cook us. He's following us, I've little doubt, and——"

"Mac, I'm surprised at you," broke in the Captain. "I thought you knew better than to alarm our youthful comrade."

"Dinna you fash about our youthful comrade," Macalister returned with a laugh; "when he is alarmed, Cap, it's high time we were thinking o' our sins, too."

"If you are referring to me," broke in Dandy, "I'm not alarmed in the slightest. I can get

tea ready easily enough for any visitors who come along, and there's enough damper left over from our last meal in Fat Head's load to provide a meal for more than a few."

The men laughed loudly at Dandy's simplicity ; and Vic Charlie explained that the only visitors likely to come their way were Beefsteak and his warriors, and that no tea would be served out to them.

"You see, Dandy," Macalister added, " your comrades think you are of a nervous disposition, and they dinna wish to frighten you with their fears. They dinna ken you as well as I do, of course. But you may take it as being nearly a certain fact that old Beefsteak and his merry naked men will be here before morning."

"I understand," said Dandy coolly, as the camp fire was lighted. "That means, I suppose, that we won't be here, then."

"You've struck it first shot, young man," Big Sam laughed. "We're only resting now so as to be better able to go on after sundown. Luckily there will be a bit of a moon to-night, and it is much cooler travelling after dark than before. Hurry up with the tea, Dandy, and I'll bet you'll get a fine view from the top of the ridge ahead before midnight. What will happen after that only Mac, I suppose, can tell you ; he's the only man with any imagination here."

"You mean with brains, Big Sam," interrupted

the individual mentioned calmly as he prepared to roast Dandy's pig, which had been carried by one of the boys since morning. "It's a pity, though it's a fact, that brains are a vera scarce commodity in this camp, but of course it canna be helped, and as a famous Greek philosopher said——"

A piece of timber struck the Scot at that moment, and when he had spoken his mind to Vic Charlie, who had thrown it at him, the saying of the Greek philosopher was forgotten, for which every one was grateful to Charlie.

Dandy attended to his duties methodically and well, and soon an excellent meal was ready. Before the sun had dipped behind the western peaks all had dined so satisfactorily that they felt they would not need another meal for days. But seeing that they had felt the same way at lunch, only four hours earlier, Dandy didn't pay much heed to their protestations that he did not need to think of replenishing their larder just then, and after "washing up " went to see if he could shoot anything. Dandy had already assumed the full responsibility of his position as cook. The little clump of timber round the pool was well stocked with many kinds of game, and Dandy had no trouble in providing the next day's menu without being out of sight of the camp fire. Darkness had now fallen over the valleys beneath, but the peaks still caught the last rays of the hidden sun,

and the effect was strange indeed. The young moon was fast following the sun down behind the great western ranges, but still it would lend its light for another two hours.

"This is a funny place," Dandy mused as he gazed upwards at the mighty peaks. "I don't see how we are going to climb over these to-night, or even in several days and nights. That wall which blocks the way ahead is almost sheer, and our carriers will never face it with their loads. Ah, well! the Captain knows his business, I suppose, and Macalister is no fool, while Big Sam, Vic Charlie, Frenchy, and Mike would tackle anything. But, by Jupiter! If Mr. Beefsteak came up behind us now we should be in a bad way, and even the Resident Magistrate—I beg his pardon, the Warden—couldn't prevent bloodshed—Hullo! what was that?" . . .

Dandy stood motionless for a moment and listened. Only a hundred yards away, in the heart of the clump of scrub, the camp-fire gleamed brightly, but it was not from that direction the sound which had startled him came. Yet where could it have originated, and what could it mean? The rocks rose straight up on every hand from the edge of the scrub-fringed pool, and there was no room for any animal to be concealed if it were of any size, and as far as he was aware the boar was the largest quadruped in British New Guinea, or Papua, as some people called the world's

largest island. But somehow he knew it was not a boar, and next moment the explanation came upon him with startling suddenness. It was a native ! For a moment Dandy thought it might be one of the carriers on the hunt for some little dainty which their white employers did not provide, but as the figure crossed a cleared space in the feeble moonlight he saw that the man was in full war dress, and armed with spear, shield, and club. Apparently he had been watching the white men for some time and did not know that he in turn was under observation. He glided away, and without a moment's hesitation Dandy followed, dropping the spoils he had collected in a heap. He marvelled that the native had not detected his presence, for he had fired several shots at scrub turkeys and other birds, and the reports had reverberated like thunderbolts. This thought caused him to halt for a moment to reflect. He did not wish to run into any trap, but he strongly desired to prove to his comrades that he was not the helpless youth they supposed him to be. But he could not afford to waste any time if he wished to have further dealings with the mysterious native, and suddenly recollecting that fully ten minutes had elapsed since he had fired a shot, he concluded that the native might not have been in the near vicinity then, and was probably only drawn to the spot on hearing the report. But the warrior now knew of the presence of the white men, and

evidently did not wish them to know of his proximity, or he would have announced himself and asked for a piece of tobacco, a mirror, or an aeroplane. He would have received the first two items, but the third request would have drawn forth an eloquent discourse from Macalister on the uselessness of human aspirations or some kindred subject. Dandy smiled as he thought of how Macalister's weighty words would affect the poor, ignorant savage, but remembering that he was called upon to act quickly or not at all—for the native, not having asked for anything, could not therefore be friendly disposed—he started off after the elusive warrior. The latter gentleman did not seem to be in any particular hurry, and Dandy soon gained upon him. It was now too dark to distinguish anything, but the smell of the paint-besmeared, perspiring body was a sure guide as to the distance intervening, and the broken scrub where the native had passed through afforded an easy passage to his follower. Soon Dandy emerged into the open, and for a moment he thought he had lost his man. Dripping rocks rose all around, covered with moss and fern-like vegetation, and at the base great fat snakes and other reptiles of the lizard tribe wriggled about in all directions. The lad did not like the sensation he experienced when he accidentally squelched some of these creatures under his feet, but as he couldn't see them it was their business to get out of his way



DANDY CROUCHED INTO THE WALL ONLY A FEW FEET FROM HIS
FVIL-SMELLING BODY.

unless they meant to fight. Dandy was puzzled. The native had disappeared completely, although the olfactory evidence of his presence was still strong. The lad ran along the base of the rocks. He had reached the head of the gully his comrades and he had been negotiating all day, and no egress seemed possible except back by the way they had come. Then where had the native gone? Dandy looked everywhere, but no sign of the odoriferous one could he see. He paused to take a drink at a tiny cascade which dripped from a point in the rocks above his head, and as he did so a ferociously-spiked club fell beside him. Dandy sprang back and awaited eventualities, ready to face anything. Then he laughed. A man was climbing down the rock face, and if his strange mutterings were not swear words they certainly were uttered with a fervour which indicated that they were expressions of deep feeling. A moment later and the warrior was on the ground looking for the club he had dropped, and Dandy crouched into the wall only a few feet from his evil-smelling body. He could easily have sprung out upon the unsuspecting warrior, but his sporting instinct forbade such an action, and in any case, he wanted to know more about the man's movements. The native picked up his club, and, still muttering unintelligibly, began to scale the rocks again. Dandy waited a few moments and then prepared to follow. He could still see the camp

fire blazing, and hear Vic Charlie and Big Sam singing the famous "Swaggies song" in most dismal tones, but he did not wish any assistance. Up over the rock face he scrambled after the grunting warrior, finding easy foothold in the gnarled, creeping interlacements which grew all over the dank wall. He was strong and light, and filled with youthful enthusiasm, and the work entailed no special effort. In fact, he was soon only a few feet behind the native, and his only fear was that the latter might again drop his club either accidentally or otherwise. But the native never became aware of his presence, and both toiled upwards for a hundred feet. Then the native slid over a ledge and almost on his heels Dandy followed, his rifle slung on his back and his revolver in his belt out of harm's way. He wished to take no advantage over the other, but he thought he could give a good account of himself in a fair man-to-man fight. It took him only a minute to realise that he had reached a gorge which split the range in two, and which had been hidden from his comrades because of the trees and creeping vegetation which grew across its mouth, apparently all finding root round the pool where the camp lay, yet stretching skywards until blending with the rocks in the darkness. No one would have imagined a passage existed there, for the gully lay to the right of the course of the stream the comrades had been following, and the

huge mountains rose almost straight upwards on either side with only a cleft between, that might well be imperceptible unless in the morning sunlight. That the gorge afforded an easy passage through the great barrier range was fairly evident to Dandy, and he felt very pleased to think of what his discovery meant to his comrades, now out of sight in the timber patch below. The crescent moon shone dimly down the narrow ravine, but not a sound broke the silence of night. The native was running off along the bed of the gorge when Dandy clambered over the ledge, but in a few seconds the lad was after him.

Somehow he knew that if the warrior escaped, danger would follow, and he was quite decided that the man in front would carry no news to his people until after he had come off best in an argument in which most persuasive influences, if not eloquence, would be used to show him the error of his ways. The climax came soon, and not in a manner favourable to Dandy. He tripped over a stone and fell forward forcibly on his face, and at the sound of his fall the warrior turned and saw him. With a suppressed cry of astonishment he leaped back upon the daring youth, his club brandished on high, and his intentions easily apparent. But Dandy was not yet tired of life and he did not wait until the blow fell. Instead, he regained his feet, but crouched low as if still recumbent. The warrior swung his club once

round his own head and then brought it down with terrific force over his low-lying victim. The blow missed, however, for the intended recipient had suddenly shot forward and caught the savage by the feet. The club flew off at a tangent, and the wielder came down upon the ground with a thud which could not have been good for his system. Dandy wriggled free and sat upon him, and after a bit the native ceased to struggle. No doubt the fact that Dandy's hands were round his throat was partly responsible.

"Well, this affair has been very easy, after all," the lad murmured, as he rolled the man over on his side and hitched him to a long, fibrous creeper. "I really don't see how any white man should require to use firearms against natives, unless this one is an exceptionally poor sample——" Dandy spoke too soon. The "poor sample" suddenly wriggled free, snapping the tendrils which bound him without any apparent effort of strength, and, leaping to his feet with a yell of rage and defiance which resounded among the rocks for some minutes, flew at Dandy. He was a big man, but without his club, doubtless, he was somewhat handicapped. He caught the lad in his powerful arms and raised him over his head, intending, probably, to dash him against the ground with all his available strength. He did not, however, simply because Dandy could wriggle a bit too. Even as he was poised in the air he pivoted round

between the warrior's hands, and while in his inverted position gripped his adversary's throat. Then his lithe body swung gracefully over the other's shoulders, his hands still retaining their grip, so that when his feet touched the ground the two men were back to back, the native's arms twisted almost out of their sockets, and Dandy's in a favourable position for exerting all his pressure on his victim's windpipe. But Dandy was an athlete of a school which considered acrobaticism of considerable importance in dealing with men physically stronger than its pupils, and the native was not well educated in that art. The result was that when Dandy sat down next moment, he bent the other's body backwards over his head, and finally flung him in a heap in front of him. Of course, the poor, untutored savage had long ago relaxed his hold, and when Dandy again tied him he was not in a fit state to try further conclusions with his youthful antagonist.

Dandy arose and breathed rapidly for a minute ; the effort had taxed him to his utmost, and well he knew it was only his knowledge of science which had brought him out victor. The young moon was now shedding its eerie light over the desolate and silent gorge, and the insect night pests were feasting on his perspiring skin.

"Ah, well !" Dandy soliloquised. "I don't think that fellow will carry any tales for an hour or two, so I had better get back to camp and tell

the boys that we have been watched—— Jove ! those mosquitoes are bad here——”

He slapped viciously at his face and killed several of the blood-sucking parasites, leaving their gory remains clinging to his skin. He examined his prisoner carefully and satisfied himself that he could not readily escape for some time, and then swung himself down the rock face into the main ravine. A few minutes later he burst through the timber clump into the camp. His comrades were all—with the exception of Frenchy, who was sleeping—sitting in the smoke of the fire telling yarns to each other, and Fat Head and his comrades were still feasting on a little delicacy in the shape of a snake they had captured. Dandy was just on the point of calling out to the men when a series of discordant yells burst out farther down the valley and a mob of hideously ornamented savages rushed in on the camp. The comrades at once were on their feet with rifles ready. They were used to surprise attacks.

“Where’s Dandy?” cried the Captain anxiously.

“Here,” the lad answered. “I’m all right ; don’t worry about me.” He threw himself flat upon the ground behind a boulder and, levelling his rifle, waited.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CANNIBAL CHIEF

YELLING like demons, and with lighted torches, the painted warriors rushed in on the camp, and certainly only a machine-gun could have checked the onslaught. Dandy experienced some strange emotions. He was not with his comrades in the moment of danger, and surely his duty was to share their fate. And they would think he had tried to save himself, whereas he was taking risks of which they could know nothing, and his sole intentions were to help them. Still, he was puzzled ; a silence had fallen over the camp which a few seconds before had resounded with talk and laughter, and although the fire blazed brightly not a sound came from its vicinity. His comrades had dissolved into the darkness, and it was upon a deserted camp that the warriors were charging. Beefsteak was urging on his men from behind. He knew the deadly power of the white men's rifles and he was taking no risks. Perhaps a score or so of his best men might go down when the fire-tubes spoke ; but then they were better dead

and out of his road, for some of them would be sure to challenge him for his position some day ; and anyway, after the white men had exhausted the power of their fire-spitting gods he and a chosen few could easily rush in and overpower them.

But if Beefsteak reasoned thus, he must have been as greatly surprised as was Dandy when he realised that the white men offered no opposition. The warriors closed in on the fire and smashed about with their spiked clubs, not forgetting to show their prowess by keeping up their fiendish shouts. Their weapons did no damage, however, unless when they happened to strike a head that sported frizzled hair and a ring or peg in the nose. In the crowd, and general excitement, that happened frequently and gave Dandy some reason to hope that, in time, the natives would annihilate each other.

"It seems to me," the watcher muttered to himself, "the boys are well able to play at any game friend Beefsteak can devise. Of course, they are lying low all round and ready to act when the time comes. I suppose I'd better try to collar that ugly old Mamoose and fight him for his chieftainship ; that would end all trouble in the quickest way." He arose and, watching his opportunity, ran forward from tree to tree towards the great chief Beefsteak, who was directing the attack on the camp with shrill commands. Evidently he was not yet aware that his men were having a Papuan

Donnybrook among themselves. Not a sign of the white men's presence could Dandy detect, and he marvelled greatly, for he had seen them all round the fire only a minute before the storm burst. He concluded, however, that Macalister was adopting some strategy and that the Captain and he had somehow convinced their more fiery comrades that discretion was occasionally more profitable than valour, and that their presence would be announced in good time. But Dandy greatly desired to tackle Beefsteak himself. He burned to earn the commendation of his comrades, and he was absolutely fearless, though what chance he could have in conflict with the mighty but cunning warrior-chief was surely small indeed. Another minute and he had passed the fire, and now he was wriggling forward between the scene of pandemonium and the extremely cautious Beefsteak. Nearer and nearer he crept towards the unsuspecting one, who was surveying the actions of his warriors with some anxiety. He knew now that something had gone wrong with his plans, and he was wondering if, after all, the white men had not some command of magic which he had not yet learned. Suddenly he shouted out to his men. What his order was Dandy did not know, and as the warriors did not heed, it mattered little. Beefsteak, by this time, was greatly excited, and doubtless would have rushed in among the playful fighters next moment. But hesitation even for a

moment is sometimes dangerous, and it was so in the present case.

Dandy was immediately behind him. "I'm sorry to tackle you from behind, old man," the lad muttered, "but I know you're not very particular about nice discriminations yourself, and—Hullo!" Dandy lay flat on the ground again.

Another figure had leaped from the darkness upon poor Beefsteak, and with a grunt most eloquently expressive of the nature of the cause of his downfall, the great Chief fell heavily among some nettle scrub and lay still. The other man had his knees on his bared chest, and the fallen Mamoose's throat was compressed in his hands. For a moment Dandy was too much surprised to make any movement, yet he knew that the victor in the strange struggle he had witnessed would soon discover his presence and make short work of him. Evidently a Mamoose or chief of a Papuan tribe had to be ready to fight at all times, and, knowing this, never stood upon ceremony, nor hesitated to strike first when opportunity came his way.

And so with Dandy now. "I can play at that game too," he murmured, "but I wish I could see your face, my friend——" He arose to his feet and carefully calculating the intervening distance, sprang straight at the man who was still bending over Beefsteak. He was getting used to this kind of work by this time, and he knew the value of a sudden attack. He landed on the man's back

and felt for his throat, as Macalister had instructed him to do always when settling any differences with people whom he thought might be stronger than himself. But something was wrong, surely? The plan had worked well every time Dandy had tried it previously, but this native didn't seem to worry much about the suddenness or the method of attack. He got upon his feet and, detaching Dandy's grip, swung him round in his extremely powerful arm, and laid him upon the ground as easily as if he were handling a very small child. Dandy continued to struggle violently, but already he had received a great surprise. The man wore garments not unlike his own ! Had he taken them from the body of one of his comrades? The thought nerved Dandy to exert himself to his utmost, and he brought into play all his science and knowledge of the art of self-defence. But it was wasted effort, and the lad soon realised that he was dealing with a person who, if ignorant of certain laws of jiu-jitsu, knew enough of other sciences to more than counterbalance what he lacked in that direction. And he was so terrifically strong, too.

Suddenly the man spoke and Dandy's heart bounded the instant he heard the voice.

"Aye, my laddie," it said, "you're vera clever, an' you're fairly strong ; but, man, you havena' yet grasped the importance o' strategy. Now, you fastened on to me as if I were a frizzly-haired, ring-nosed New Guinean, whereas——"

“Macalister !” shouted Dandy. “Let me up ! I’m choking—I’m——”

The powerful Scot raised him to his feet with a laugh, and after seeing that Beefsteak was harmless, said : “As I have already remarked, strategy is mightier than either the sword or a good fountain-pen. You’ll have to study it, Dandy, my boy, if you mean to be successful in life, and no’ like Vic Charlie and Big Sam. Now what made you think you could deal with any self-respecting fellow in the way you tackled me?”

“I didn’t know it was you ; and I wanted to get a hold of Beefsteak. I’ve got one of his men already. Where are our fellows?”

“Round about you. They’re all looking for you. I thought I’d make sure of this gentleman so that we could do a deal with the niggers if you were in their hands. As for those howling demons by the fire over there, we’ll attend to them presently ; I don’t think the Captain will be able to hold Vic Charlie and the others in check much longer. Fat Head and his boys are chanting their prayers somewhere near, I suppose——”

“Is it necessary to shoot those men, do you think? Can’t we escape?”

“I doubt it ; our stores are all on the other side of the fire, and we canna’ remove them without being seen, and we’re certainly not going to run away without them.”

“You can go nap on that safely,” spoke a

voice beside them, and Big Sam crawled up. "I see you've cooked old Beefsteak's goose, Mac," he continued. "I meant to have a little argument with him myself. Where are you, kid? I can't see your face but I know you by your size."

"Oh, I'm all right," Dandy answered. "I've been prospecting a bit. I've got a turkey and some pigeons."

"Well, you'll see a bit of a fight as well. The Cap wouldn't hear of our taking a hand in this game until we had found you, but I reckon Charlie, Frenchy, Mike, and yours truly mean to join in now. Come on, Macalister, we'll need every trigger-puller. These fellows won't continue to play monkey-tricks round the fire much longer——"

"Yes, they will, Sam," spoke a quiet voice from the darkness, "they've found the sugar-bag the cook didn't remove after tea, and they'll fight over it for hours. Come, boys, we're all here, so let us set to work as coolly and as carefully as we can. Remember, we must not kill our fellow-men, and these savages, surely, have some right to do as they please in their own country. We are Britons, men, and must bear the white men's burden."

"Zat is so ; let us carry ze vite men's burden ; eet ees not so vairy heavy," another voice added and Macalister laughed, although why, Big Sam did not seem to know.

"We'll carry no blamed burdens so long as

we can get niggers to do the job," chimed in the voice of Vic Charlie; "and Cap, if you are going to order us to pick up our swags and run away back the road we came, I tell you flat we won't do it. What do you say, Mike?"

"Oi say the same, Vic. We're going on until we come to that threasure and all the niggers in New Guinea won't shtop us. Begorrah! just let me in among those dhirty, howling fellows and I'll show them how Oirishmen foight."

"You are not going in among them, Mike," the Captain said. "You, with the others, must endeavour to collect our carriers and our stores, and get them safely past those warriors. I am very sorry that we must retrace our steps, but as we cannot easily get out of this gorge any other way that I know, and must not fight the natives unless in the last extremity, there is no help for it. We'll carry Beefsteak with us for a bit——"

"Then we'd better get on the move at once," put in Macalister. "Beefsteak is in his full senses now and is taking in every word we say. Give the signal to Fat Head, Cap, you can whistle best."

"And we're not to have any fight?" wailed Big Sam. "We're to run away like spanked schoolboys?"

"Well, we cannot stay here without shooting the natives, and the Warden would make us answer for that in full," the Captain said. "I

don't think we can climb that rock face ahead quickly enough to escape being speared, so nothing remains for us to do but retreat unless some of you know a hidden way out of this place——”

“I do,” put in Dandy. “I found a road out, and I can take you all away in a few minutes.”

“Don't tell, Dandy, and I'll give you my shirt,” implored Vic Charlie. “We want to force the Cap into letting us teach these beggars that they cannot do as they like with honest white prospectors.”

“Dandy,” said the Captain, “if you know any way out of this place other than by the way we came, lead on at once, and save useless bloodshed. I'll call the carriers together by signal, and we'll leave these warriors arguing among themselves.”

“That's all very fine,” grumbled Big Sam, “but supposing we do get away all right, when is this silly game to end? If the niggers once get into their hair-boxes that we're afraid of them, I reckon the day of the prospector is done in New Guinea.”

“Maybe no',” said Macalister, lifting Beefsteak to his feet. “I'm no' against a bit fight at times just to show there's no ill-will, but in my opinion there are times when fighting is a vera foolish game. Now if you mighty warriors would only study strategy——”

“You mean Shakespeare?” interrupted Big

Sam. "Of course if he backs you skeared fellows out, I'm not going to run against him."

"Call it Shakespeare if you like," Macalister laughed. "Anyhow, he who sometimes runs away fights better far than those who stay, and he who would Papuans slay will die himself, you bet, some day."

"Blow me for a fat head! I never knew Shakespeare said that," cried Sam. "Come on, Vic and Mike; the Cap is right as usual, and we're wrong; you can't get behind Shakespeare. Lead on, Dandy, and punctured be he who cannot hold enough—of tucker."

Vic Charlie and Irish Mike were not so enthusiastic over Shakespeare's supposed words as Big Sam. In fact, Mike had serious doubts if the great poet ever said the words Macalister ascribed to him. But this was no time for discussion, for the warriors were already becoming tired of their head-splitting and sugar-hunting sport, and probably soon would be spreading out in search of the men who had so carelessly left the sugar by the fire. And in a few sentences the Captain gave his orders and no dissentient voice was raised, although Dandy would have liked very much to ask Macalister one or two questions.

They crawled back past the fire, hauling the gagged Beefsteak with them, and in time reached the base of the rock Dandy had scaled after the native who presumably was an advance scout of



THEY CRAWLED BACK PAST THE FIRE, HAULING THE GAGGED
BEEFSTEAK WITH THEM.

Beefsteak's army. By this time the Captain had gathered in Fat Head and the carriers by a whistled signal, and Dandy had collected the game he had shot earlier in the evening. Some careful work soon put the prospectors in possession of their stores again, and while the warriors still fought together in the fire-lit zone, they began to scale the rock after Dandy. In a few minutes all were on top, Beefsteak being hauled aloft with the stores, after having been fixed in the sling by Macalister. When Dandy brought his comrades to the native he had captured and explained all that he thought necessary their astonishment was unbounded—none could imagine how their boy cook could single-handed lay the powerful warrior low. Many and varied were the comments made by Big Sam and the others, but perhaps those of Beefsteak when his gag was removed were of the most importance. It was now almost impossible to see, for the moon had gone down behind the ridges, and the sides of the valley shut out the starlight. After cutting the tendrils which formed the ladder-way up the rocks and thus rendering pursuit impracticable, the men kindled a fire so as to provide them with light to re-arrange the stores and interview their prisoners. Fat Head was greatly interested, but his men promptly went to sleep as soon as they realised all danger was past. Dandy's prisoner was very sullen until he saw that Beefsteak was inclined to be communicative,

after which he vied with the great chief in giving away information. And this was of a startling nature.

"What for you fellows interfere with me?" Beefsteak suddenly demanded when he gathered that his captors were few in number and inclined to treat him decently. Like most of his kind, he thought that anything but abuse from any one was a sign of weakness, and he meant to take advantage of that fact. He didn't know the type of men with whom he was dealing, however, for after all his experience was limited.

"We most humbly beg your pardon, old man," replied Big Sam, in mock humility. "You see, we are verdant new chums, mostly from Australia, and we didn't know you wanted to dine on us. Really we are most horribly, awfully sorry, but we'll see it won't happen again. All the same, if you try to clear out I'll put a bullet through you."

"Beefsteak my name. I get good educate from missionaries. I mighty big gentleman. I no' like your talky talky. I report you to my friend the Warden. He no' far away now."

"Hims mighty big liar," said Fat Head derisively. "Hims no blamed good for anything but playing with boys. Hims no' know latest song from London."

"Beefsteak knows more songs from London than you, you blamed no-good carrier boy. How

dare you speak to me—a mighty chief? When my friend the Warden comes he'll give you beans, God save the King ! ”

“ Just slow up a bit, Beefsteak,” broke in Macalister. “ You're saying a good lot about your friend the Warden, and as far as I can see, without much reason. Have you ever seen any Warden except when before him as a lawbreaker? ”

“ My word, yes, you bet. Beefsteak no' break laws now. He respectable British warrior. Rule, Britannia ! New Warden of goldfields tell him take men and go after law-breaking prospectors, and bring them back to him. Beefsteak big friend and start away blamed quick. He get on your track and travel mighty fast. He come up, and first thing he know, you fellows collar hims and give hims bad time. My word ! the Warden will hang you all.”

“ He might,” grunted Vic Charlie, “ if we gave him the chance, but the Warden that sends murdering niggers like you after honest white prospectors gets no respect from me, and I'll go my pants that even the Captain and Macalister will kick at that too.”

“ We will,” said the Captain grimly, “ but we'll have to get a better guarantee than Beefsteak's that the Warden sent him after us, or gave any orders to any natives concerning the doings of prospectors. Personally, I don't believe a word Beefsteak utters. He is a notorious liar, and——”

"There, I knew it!" complained Vic Charlie. "When we get a chance of feeling like sending the Warden to—down south, the Cap always takes his part. What do you say, Macalister?"

"I agree with the Captain that the new Warden never gave any instructions to Beefsteak. The vera idea is preposterous."

"And so say I," cried Dandy indignantly. "However much we may have reason to dislike the Warden we must not believe all that a native tells us about him. No sane white man would give a half-civilised savage any such instructions as this person says he got, and surely, gentlemen, the man appointed by the Federal Government of Australia must at least possess ordinary intelligence."

"Shure now and we moight think the silly old Warden was some near relation of our cook," chimed in Irish Mike. "Just observe his eloquence on his behalf. Begorrah, boys, I never saw Dandy excited before."

"And you don't see him now, Irish," Vic Charlie laughed, "unless you can see in the dark. But it is always the same. I reckon this little pilgrim party should give up prospecting and try running a store, or selling tracts or patent pills. This world is too wicked for such innocent sheep as us——"

"Shut off steam for a second or two, Charlie," the Captain ordered. "Beefsteak is bursting to

tell us something else before we hear it from the other fellow, I suppose. Hurry up, Beefsteak, we've a long way to go before morning."

"Beefsteak tells you blamed straight, my word, you bet, the Warden is coming after you fellows. You have no right up here, you'll all be deaded 'fore long. My friend the Warden say to me, 'Kill them all. They no' good fellows.'"

The Captain was puzzled and Macalister was in a similar state of mind. Big Sam and Vic Charlie were delighted if anything, because well they knew that if the Captain and the brawny Scot were once roused to fighting pitch, they would have the time of their lives. Not that any of the men desired to fight the natives, but they were firmly convinced that as long as their party were afraid of the law and dealt with the natives as per instructions received from the authorities over in Australia, who, they supposed, were entirely ignorant of the conditions obtained in New Guinea, the success of their expedition would be greatly jeopardised.

"Beefsteak blamed big liar," Fat Head observed casually when he noticed that the men were thinking deeply.

"You git out, quick an' lively, you blamed no-good, tinned-dog-eating nigger," retorted the prisoner. "Beefsteak mighty soon send you where all crow-hearted carriers go, my word, you bet. God save the King!"

"Hu! Fat Head tink Beefsteak mighty good

at talky, but blamed little at fight," the valiant chief carrier rejoined after making sure that Beefsteak was securely tied. "Hims tink warriors no' much use when Beefsteak their mamoose."

"That's right," cried Irish Mike. "Have a decent fight your two selves. Shure an' we cyant be blamed for that. Hold on a minute, though, Fat Head. I'll tie Beefsteak's hands and feet. It's not fair to give him the use of them in a foight, seeing he moight hurt you if you came near enough——"

"Men," said Dandy, "is it not time we got on the move again. I've just been looking down at the warriors in our old camp, and I think they now know where we are, and may try to come after us."

"Well, let them come," growled Big Sam. "I reckon we're free to defend ourselves now that we know the Warden has sent the beggars after us. You get out of the way, Dandy; you're too young and good-looking to be mixed up in the fun."

"Yes, he ees too, vat you call, new chum," cried Frenchy. "Ve vill fight ze better ven ve know he is safe."

"What a wonderful lot of fighters you fellows are!" said Macalister, who with the Captain had been devoting some attention to the other prisoner during the last few minutes. "It so happens, however, that we haven't any time to enjoy the

pleasure of killing a few niggers. This gentleman here whom Dandy has argued with already has given me some valuable information, and I propose that we act on it without delay."

"What's up, Mac?" asked Big Sam. "Is the Warden coming himself?"

"I hope he is," muttered Irish Mike. "We'll make him a carrier-boy to Beefsteak."

"This native of the land in which we are at present sojourning has no knowledge of English, and therefore may be a bit more reliable in what he says than Mr. Beefsteak," went on Macalister. "He has just confided to me that another party of white gold-seekers are pushing up the next valley to this one, and that it is the intention of a full tribe of warriors who are tracking them to wipe them out. He says that a general combination of the chief people around here is about to take place, and that if we give him a present of a cheap mirror and a piece of soap he'll use his influence with the Tapu priests in an endeavour to contrive our escape."

"Howling dingoes!" exclaimed Vic Charlie. "If the fellow said all that he must be a greater talker than Frenchy. Give him the soap, boys; he smells as if he needed it."

"Don't insult the poor fellow," reproved Macalister. "He's a commercial gentleman with information to sell. Are we to deal or not?"

"You bet your pants we will!" cried Big Sam,

"but not to buy his good graces. Let him have Mac's soap and Frenchy's broken looking-glass on condition that he goes straight back to the combined gangs of niggers and tells them that from now on we don't recognise the fat-headed Warden's orders, that we can all shoot pretty straight, and that there will be a lot of Papuan widows in the land should we be forced to defend ourselves."

"I sign my name to them sentiments, too," cried Vic Charlie.

"And so does Irish Mike," said that gentleman. "I'll not allow any dhirty spalpeen to kill me if I can help it."

"Comrades!" declaimed Frenchy, with a dramatic gesticulation. "Ve are free citizens of ze great Empire on vich ze sun never roosts. Ve vill nevaire surrender. Eet ees liberty or dead——"

"Fat Head tinks so, too. Hims like hear Frenchy fellow speak. He no say much sometimes, but other times he talky lot no mean nothing." Fat Head's meaning was not very clear, but Frenchy took his words to be complimentary.

"Very well, boys," said the Captain. "Self-defence is man's first law, and we shall certainly take every precaution to retain our lives. If the new Warden has been so foolish as to make the natives a sort of police over the white prospectors, I fear he will have reason to regret his action before long." He spoke sternly.

"Who is this new Warden?" asked Dandy. "I should like to see the man who is responsible for all our troubles."

"By the Captain's fancy moustache, boys!" Vic Charlie laughed. "Dandy is ready to fight, too; I move we get up a fight between him and the all-fired idiot of a Warden."

"I am certainly ready and willing to fight any man who gives power to the like of Beefsteak to do as he pleases," the lad said. "I don't think it is right; but I will not believe that the Warden made any such mistake——"

"And if it comes to some trigger-pulling," added Macalister, "I'll wager my bottle of fruit salts that Dandy will be as good a man as is in this crowd. You all seem to forget that it was he who collared this fellow, and who found this road out of the valley below——"

"Draw in your horses, old man," Big Sam interrupted. "We're all proud of our new chum cook, and I reckon he knows it. But this game of the old fossil of a Warden has struck us all of a heap, so much that we've had no time to say nice things to him."

"Men, we cannot waste more time here," broke in the Captain. "By morning we must be near our destination. We'll fortify ourselves then, and hold our ground against all comers, be they black, white, or yellow. Come on, boys; let's get on the move. We'll take our two prisoners with us

until daylight, then we'll let them go with full instructions as to their fate if they ever fall into our hands again."

"Good old Cap!" cried Irish Mike delightedly. "Begorrah, I knew he wouldn't stand insults for ever. Bhoys, we're on our own now; let's plant our own flag on the highest peak we can find in the country."

"If that means you'll hang up my spare pants," said Vic Charlie, "I vote against your proposal. My fancy shirt went for a dish-cloth already, and you can bet I'm not going to let the chain off any more of my personal property."

The Captain assured Charlie that his garments would not be used for purposes other than that for which they were intended, and soon all were stumbling along the dry water-course leading to the pass through the great range. In time the summit of the divide was reached, and knowing that they were safe from pursuit, a halt was called, and the tired wanderers lay down and slept, Macalister alone keeping guard. A delightfully cool breeze was in motion on the ridge, and it fanned the men into deeper slumber, and blew away mosquitoes and other insect pests if any existed at the height.

At dawn Dandy was astir preparing breakfast. There was no water on the summit of the pass, but Fat Head ran down the other side a little way and procured some from an ice-cold spring.

The country in front was vastly different from that they had traversed. Looking back, nothing but serried ridges and sharp peaks could be seen, but ahead the ground fell away into a magnificent valley clad with palms of all varieties, and the colour of the orchid-screening foliage in the quivering morning sunlight was the most gorgeous sight Dandy had ever seen. A large river flowed through the middle of the smiling valley, and beyond the backbone chain of New Guinea rose gradually until lost in the cloud haze.

The two prisoners were given some breakfast and set free, and in a few minutes they had disappeared down the gorge, running a neck-and-neck race towards the last camp. Dandy watched them with considerable interest. What his thoughts were he did not say.

CHAPTER V

THE NATIVE VILLAGE

THE value of Dandy's discovery was now apparent to all. If they had continued straight ahead over the mountain from the last camp, they would have found themselves facing a still higher range, and probably might have been compelled to retreat after all, owing to the impassable nature of the country separating them from their destination. Indeed, Macalister said he was certain that Dandy's pass afforded the only way out of the *cul de sac* they had reached the previous evening, and gave as his reason that Beefsteak would never have rushed the white men if he didn't think they were in a trap and couldn't possibly escape to square accounts later. Now, however, the dauntless prospectors were out of the labyrinth of peaks and gullies, and the Captain announced, after taking an observation, that the promised land lay just beyond the great range which towered into the sky on the other side of the winding silver streak they could see. "That must be one of the Mambare headwaters," the Captain continued, indicating the river with a nod. "If we had

known of its existence, we could have cut over from Esperance Valley and forced a way up in whaleboats, thus avoiding all trouble with natives, and being better equipped with stores."

"And maybe some of the other fellows are sailing up its beautiful flower-bordered channel now," wailed Big Sam, who sometimes thought he should have been a poet, or perhaps a land agent. "We fellows are always missing chances, and I reckon that when we get to that place where the river flows over gold nuggets as big as Frenchy's head we'll find half of the world there before us. We're always too late."

"And you're always grumbling, Big Sam," said Vic Charlie. "Look at the fun we're having, and anyhow if half the reports are anywhere near the truth there's enough gold for all."

"And shure cyant Dandy discover another pass through that range opposite and save us climbing over the top," put in Irish Mike consolingly. "Every party who starts for the land of nuggets cyant have a cook like ours, and they've all got to get over that little mountain wall, anyway, whether they sail up that river or travel on board a balloon."

"Why doesn't Macalister say something?" asked Big Sam as the carriers picked up their loads and moved off. "I've found out that when he takes a holiday at spouting out chunks of wisdom he's something up his sleeve. Now, I

reckon it is only fair that we should know what he's thinking about——"

"I've been thinking all along, Big Sam," said Macalister, "that we're putting too much faith in the stories we've heard about this wonderful valley of gold. You'll remember I asked for proof the night we left Esperance camp and you fellows only laughed at me. I hope we'll find everything according to our programme, but I've vera serious doubts——"

"Hurry, boys!" the Captain interrupted. "Mac is croaking again, and he'll never stop if we listen to him. It's this new Warden's tactics that are worrying me; the old one was bad enough, but the latest Resident Magistrate for these parts has the strangest ideas of any sane man I ever knew."

"Aye," Macalister grinned; "he means to hustle along the Millennium before its time, but his methods mean the extermination of the white man—that is, of course, if the stories we've heard have any foundation."

"They haven't," Dandy interjected. "The Resident Magistrate is a white man himself——"

"But he is likely an old grandmother of a man," volunteered Irish Mike, "and thinks we white prospectors are bad people."

"No Australian Government surely would send an old man to New Guinea," Dandy replied. "He wouldn't be able to understand the people

and the conditions, and most probably would die of fever right away."

"You've a mighty lot to say, kid, for a new chum cook," Vic Charlie laughed, but not unkindly ; "but I thought some of us had already seen the new Warden in Flash Harry's camp?"

"Aye," said Macalister, "and he's not an old man at all. He's doubtless new to the work, though, and will be the better of some experience. Let's push on to this wonderful land of gold and forget about him——"

"We're pushing on as fast as any white men can," Big Sam growled ; "and if some of you long-winded talking machines would stop spouting you would save a lot of wind and make things easier for us poor beggars. Whew ! it is hot——"

"Then say less yourself and you'll feel cooler," Vic Charlie advised, "and we'll hang the Warden if we run across him out without his mother. All the same, I'd like to know why Macalister is so half-hearted on our picnic?"

"Don't shtart him or he'll go on for a week before he runs down !" cried Irish Mike. "Shure and haven't we suffered enough already? Why cyant ye all be as wise as Frenchy?"

"Well, lads," began Macalister, "I'll say all I have to say in less than a minute, and get it over, and I promise I'll never refer to the subject again. I think there is something wrong about this Eldorado because

the reports were much too good. If they had been true, the men who found the place would have made a greater effort to hold the ground than they appear to have done ; and supposing they had to leave for want of stores or because of the natives, they would—if they are like any prospectors I have ever met—have kept their secret and gone back again. Instead, however, the news is scattered broadcast, which, coupled with the fact that there was no Warden in Esperance Valley at the time, looks to me very suspicious. Of course every man in the old camp will be making for the new find by this time, and all the Wardens who ever were in New Guinea won't keep them back. One result will be that Esperance Valley workings will be practically abandoned——”

“ Well, if there are no people there to jump our claims we can easily go back to them if the new show fizzles out,” put in Irish Mike. “ Shure and we were needing a bit of a holiday, anyway.”

“ I don't know,” Macalister said thoughtfully. “ You see, according to Australian law, claims not worked continuously, unless legally exempted by the Warden, can be jumped by any people. Now, I've been in some jumping fights before, in Western Australia and other places, and I know that the law doesn't favour the man who abandons a claim and thinks he can go back to it any time. Why, if that were so, some wealthy capitalists in Europe could stake off the whole of this country and then

close it to prospectors for all time. Only the fact that they must work the ground they swing their pegs round, or abandon it to those who will work it, prevents such an injustice to fellows like us."

"In our case that is all nonsense, Macalister," the Captain said, as they began to force their way through some gorgeously flowering scrub. "All the claims in Esperance Valley were good, and if any of the men did jump ours they couldn't at the same time hold their own, and we could easily retaliate by taking theirs. Besides, we are good friends with them all, and I don't think that the party who tried to jump our old workings would find this climate healthy, seeing that we are really trying to open up new country for all our old comrades of Esperance Valley."

"Exactly," laughed Macalister ; "and I expect they are all in the belief they are doing the same. If so, Esperance Valley will be deserted now, unless the new Warden has taken up his abode there, and any new people who come along will annex any claims they fancy, and the Warden himself is evidence that everything was in accordance with the law."

"What on earth do you mean, Mac?" the Captain asked, turning and confronting the Scot. "Do you think we have been tricked?" The Captain was certainly perturbed to some extent, an unusual state of affairs with him.

"I'll not say that," Macalister replied. "Maybe everything is all right, and maybe we're going straight ahead to a marvellous gold deposit. I hope so, but I think it is as well that we should realise as soon as possible that there are factors in this game we havena' taken into account, for of course Beefsteak's account of the Warden, although most likely not true, has a lot of significance to those of us who are of a reasoning disposition. Naturally, I don't expect that Big Sam or Irish Mike will grasp my meaning, but, poor fellows, they hadna' the advantage o' a Board School education, and we canna' blame them——"

"What does he mean, Mike?" the big one inquired, interrupting Macalister's speech at this point.

"Shure, an' how can I tell?" Mike answered. "Macalister doesn't know himself; he isn't much of a scholar——"

"I'll tell you what he means!" cried Vic Charlie. "Gather round to see the fun, boys——"

"We haven't time to spare," the Captain interposed. "The question is, are we going on or are we to turn back?"

"We are going on," said Macalister. "We'll see the thing through now at any cost. I've said all I am going to say in the way of damping enthusiasm, but believe me it had to come off my chest sooner or later."

“ Very well,” agreed the Captain ; “ we’ll push ahead and take all chances ; what games any one can be playing that we need fear is beyond one to imagine ; but I hope to say a few words to the new Warden, nevertheless, some day, and I don’t think he’ll appreciate them.”

Nothing more was said on any subject relating to the gold deposits for which they were searching or the new Warden. The day was now too hot for argumentative discussion, and each man found that his feet required all his attention if he did not wish to trip over the gnarled undergrowths or tramp on some scaly wriggling creature too lazy to get out of his way. All forenoon they travelled through a dense forest in which roamed animals of many varieties, though the wild pig family was most in evidence. Overhead among the exquisitely tinged foliage flitted birds of paradise with even more gorgeously coloured tails, and black cockatoos and other members of the parrot tribe, and the forest rang with their incessant chatterings. In time, however, all forms of bird life became stilled and their voices silent. Noon was at hand, and only white men or black men out on a head-hunting expedition continued to exert themselves then ; all other forms of life went to sleep until the scorching sun was well down in the west. Then Nature would once more awake and the strange drama of life—and death—be resumed. In New Guinea all creatures are either

hunted or hunters, as occasion arises, and to the victor belongs the spoil and the body of the victim. But the prospectors gave little thought to their environment ; it was not new to them, and they wished to reach the river before halting for lunch. Ever descending and coming into even denser-timbered country as the river was reached, they suddenly broke through into a swamp in which many amphibious creatures disported themselves, or rather basked lazily in the sun. Fat Head and his comrades objected strongly to forcing a passage over this stretch of reedy country, but the Captain would not listen to them. He knew that the river lay just beyond, and the party had to get there at the earliest possible moment if they meant to be the first of the rush to the great "Strike." But Fat Head's reasons were soon evident. The swamp was the breeding-ground of myriads of ferocious leeches, and they speedily made their presence felt in a manner most unpleasant, and which drew forth characteristic exclamations from the men, deeply expressive of feeling as they pulled the blood-sucking pests off their perspiring skins. However, they eventually gained solid ground again, and excepting for the annoyance caused by a plague of salt-seeking bees that swarmed around everywhere and drove Frenchy and Dandy almost frantic with their blister-raising efforts to extract salt from their faces, reached the swiftly-flowing waterway without interference.

It was a broad stream, and clearly could only be the main feeder of the Mambare River or some equally great water as yet unnamed and unknown.

While Dandy, assisted by the others, prepared lunch, the Captain took an observation and worked out the position, informing his comrades afterwards that they would reach their destination that night if nothing unexpected happened.

"But I read somewhere that it is always the unexpected that does happen," remarked Big Sam. "So you had better tell us when we'll gaze on that wonderful golden valley, allowing that the unexpected thing comes along."

"What is the unexpected thing?" asked Vic Charlie. "If we knew, we could get ready for it."

"Aye," Macalister said. "If man could see into the future, he might do many things, but on the whole I fancy there are more things he would leave undone. Still, your thirst for knowledge does you credit, Charlie——"

"What in blazes is Mac after now, boys?" Charlie gasped. "Who started him, and what is the cook laughing at?"

"I'm not laughing, Charlie," Dandy assured his irate comrade—"at least, not at you. Just look at those silly crocodiles under the bank there. They are expecting to have a royal feed when we attempt to cross the river——"

"Ireland for ever!" ejaculated Mike, jumping to his feet. "I never saw the brutes. What

sizes they are ! We cyan never cross with them biting at us ! ”

“ Oh, yes, we can,” the Captain said ; “ but we’ll have to make another raft, and we may be forced to send Fat Head and his men first so that they will not be so hungry when we start ! ”

“ No fear, my word, you bet ! ” cried Fat Head, who was sometimes very good at hearing. “ Fat Head rather go up to village an’ steal canoe. My word, you bet, auld lang syne ! ”

“ What village, Fat Head ? ” inquired the Captain. “ I didn’t know there was any village near here.”

“ Oh, you don’t know everything,” the chief carrier returned. “ My word, blamed big village not far away. Fat Head can see that with hims eyes shut. Hims see broken paddle over on far bank. Hims see marks here where was canoe landed. Hims see crocodiles plenty fat, an’ hims know what that means. Big village near, an’ big fight, an’ crocodiles git plenty to eat, my word, you bet——”

“ There now, Vic Charlie,” said Macalister. “ You know what the unexpected is, or was, after all.”

“ Yes,” admitted Charlie thoughtfully, “ especially as I see something stuck on a snag in mid-stream which looks mighty like a white helmet. I reckon, mates, we have got to see where that piece of headgear came from and find out some-

thing about the fellow who once lived under it. I'm beginning to think that there is something behind this story of gold nuggets that we don't know."

"Get out, Vic," Irish Mike laughed. "Shure, an' we are not first in the scramble, that's all that helmet means, but it looks moighty loike a good thing for us that some people have been before us ; the niggers won't be so hungry now, an' seeing we mustn't foight, that fact gives us more chance of saving our skins."

"You'll perhaps get all the fighting you want before long, Mike," the Captain said grimly. "While I am against fighting when it can be avoided, there is nothing left to do when some fellow-men are in the hands of the natives, whether they are rival treasure-hunters or not. Men, we must inquire farther into things, and at once. If there is a village near here, we'll visit it, and if there are white prisoners in it we'll set them free before we leave it. Hurry, boys ; every minute may mean much. We've dined well enough already, so let's away."

"Vive le Capitaine !" cried Frenchy. "He ees not afraid of ze troble, nor of ze Warden. Forward, comrades, to the rescue of monsieur of ze vite helmet, and have all your shooters in good order——"

"Hullo, Frenchy !" exclaimed Macalister in feigned surprise. "I thought you were sleeping. When did you awake? "

"Ze sons of France awake to glory," was the reply. "Comrades of ours from Esperance Valley are in danger; eet ees our duty to—to—vat you call eet, Irisher Mike?"

"To get into danger, too, an' have a real good time," Mike answered. "Begorrah an' bedad, it's a long time since I was in a first-class foight. But why is our Dandy cook not saying anything? He's in this picnic, too."

"I was wondering how some of you fellows arrive at conclusions," the cook said, packing up his utensils. "I'm only a new chum, of course, but your deductions seem to me all wrong."

"Great snakes and jigger fleas and Beef-steaks!" cried Big Sam. "Don't you see that helmet sticking on that mass of driftwood out in the water?"

"Yes, it looks as if it were quite good. I think I'll swim out and get it for Fat Head. White prospectors in New Guinea don't wear helmets, and missionaries have never been so far inland as this. Probably some native stole it or bartered for it while on a visit to the coast, and afterwards, finding it cumbersome, threw it away."

"But Flash Harry wears a helmet sometimes, Dandy," said the Captain; "and you were wearing one yourself when you first struck camp. I fear that one belonged to one of the Esperance camp boys."

"Perhaps, sir, although I cannot see how it

possibly could unless its owner left before we did."

"Blow it, Dandy!" exclaimed Vic Charlie. "If other fellows struck this river, they could have sailed up past here while we were playing the Excelsior racket."

"I don't think so. Even if this river passes within twenty miles of Esperance Valley, which, according to the rough survey sheet made by the last Warden, does not appear to be the case, no people could pull a boat up against that current fast enough to be here now. Just calculate the distance in a straight line from the camp to the position the Captain gave us before lunch, and you'll see that we must be first here. Why, if other people had to walk twenty miles to this river before beginning to force a passage up its channel, they'll not be here for a week. That current is flowing about six miles an hour, and men-power simply couldn't make headway."

"By Jupiter, laddie!" cried Macalister, "you've given me an idea. Men-power, as you say, couldn't propel a whaleboat up here in the time, but petrol could, and the Warden has a petrol launch at his service for visiting the different villages on the lower river. Remember what Dandy's prisoner told us——"

"If you mean, Macalister, that that helmet once grew over the new Warden's top," said Big Sam, "I reckon, after all, we've no call to interfere

with him in his business. I'll bet, too, that if he paid a friendly visit on the people who live somewhere up this river, his head is inside that helmet now, unless it is stuck on a pole over the tapu-house."

"And he'll know all about the Christian ways of the peace-loving, straight-living, man-eating natives," snorted Vic Charlie, who thought it his duty to back up his comrade at all times. "I reckon he won't tell any more frizz-haired beggars to hunt honest prospectors——"

"But that is not the new Warden's helmet," broke in Dandy as the party was ready to move again. "I came off the same boat at Samarai as he did, as I told you already, and not a man among all the passengers had a helmet like that out there. Why, gentlemen, surely you credit a Warden with more sense than to wear on his head a thing of that size. Only amateur explorers or Cook's tourists wear enormous head coverings of that nature. A man couldn't force a way through the bush with that thing on his head, and even a Warden would know that much."

"Boys, I do believe this blamed old new Warden is a pal of Dandy's!" sang out Vic Charlie. "He won't let us say a word against him——"

"Say as much as you like against him, Charlie," Dandy laughed. "I certainly don't care, but I can't help liking to see even a new Warden getting fair play."

“ Begorrah, we’ll give him fair play all right ! ” said Irish Mike with a laugh. “ We only hope he’ll give us the same. But what are our orders, Cap? ”

“ Follow the river up to the village. Even if the owner of that helmet is the Warden who apparently is causing us so much trouble, our duty is clear. If some other white fellow owned it, we’ll rescue him or know his fate, and if it were lost by some native chief, well, we’ll return it to him. At any rate, we’re white men, and we carry the responsibilities of white men. To the village ! ”

And up the bank of the river the men marched, each thinking in his own individual manner, and none with any idea of what the next hour would bring forth. Fat Head and his assistants were in a great state of alarm. Possibly they knew more than their masters about what lay in front. But the Captain and Macalister had suddenly changed. Hitherto the fight-desiring men of the party had been Big Sam and Vic Charlie, with Irish Mike and Frenchy as good seconds and Dandy as a sort of neutral. The Captain and Macalister had been the advocates for peace almost at any price, and their reasons were only partly understood by their comrades. But now the positions were reversed, and certainly the two last named were the most determined to visit the village.

It was a comparatively simple matter forcing

a passage along the bank because just on the fringe of the waterway all the timber had been broken down by the torrent when in flood, and to vault over the fallen trees and negotiate fallen scrub was child's play. Nevertheless, it was well on towards sundown before there were indications around that a village was near. But the signs were unmistakable. A canoe was beached here and there ; and primitive yet clever fish-traps were built in the river at favourable bends, or islands in the stream. Then a crude bridge came into view, built of bamboos, and laced together with long tendrils which shot forth red and white flowers all along their course across the stream. Suddenly the sound of a war drum broke upon the sultry air, and next moment the stockaded confines of a large village burst into view.

The Captain immediately ordered a halt. " This must be the head village of a very important tribe," he said. " We must move with extreme caution. That drum we hear is the usual signal among Papangis, Sisuretas, and Tugeris for the warriors to gather for some important ceremony."

" Then let us take part in it," suggested Irish Mike. " It is moighty high time we had something to do, and shure we don't much care whether it is getting gold we are or having some fun." Mike caressed his rifle as if it were a club as he spoke and his idea of fun needed little explanation. Fat



THE STOCKADED CONFINES OF A LARGE VILLAGE BURST INTO VIEW.

Head, however, was now very much alarmed, and he entreated Macalister to go back before their presence was detected by the inhabitants of the place.

"We be all deaded to-morrow," he wailed, "and Fat Head no' got his pay for last week's work yet." His men joined in the dismal chant, until Frenchy administered a kick to one of the most energetic complainers, and thus suddenly brought about a silence which Macalister used to inform Fat Head that he and his men would be paid on the morrow. Fat Head's intelligence was not of the highest of orders, and for a time he appeared content. It was certainly highly dangerous to enter the village in daylight, because before they could explain that they were not necessarily enemies, poisoned spears and spiked clubs would have been brought into play and probably done much damage. So a council of war was held at which each man was allowed two minutes to air his views, the while all lay among the dense undergrowths, outside the high bamboo stockade.

"Let's get on with the funeral," said Big Sam. "Time is short and we've a lot to do before supper-time."

"Yes, hustle things," agreed Vic Charlie. "We haven't more than a thousand years to live."

"I propose we slide over the barricade and find out all about the place," began Irish Mike. "After we have interviewed a dozen niggers or

so, we'll know exactly what game is on, and we'll hunt up the fellow who once owned the helmet, and see what like he is. If he is the new Warden we'll leave him, but if he isn't we'll——"

"Time's up, Mike," the Captain called. "You are next, Frenchy. What have you to say?"

"Call on dem to surrendaire, and if zay don't do so, charge dem. Ve are Britons and must not fear danger."

"Quite so," the Captain assented. "Have you anything to suggest, Dandy?"

"I think we should wait until dark and then investigate matters. We cannot very well attack a whole tribe of people in their own village without reason, and it is just possible that we might be able to find out whether or not there is a white prisoner with them without causing much trouble."

"I second Dandy's proposal," said Macalister. "There's nothing like strategy."

"Hims say what Macalister says," put in Fat Head; "but hims hopes hims will get big bit of sugar."

"And hims will get it if hims doesn't run away with hims men," the Captain said seriously. "And now that every man has spoken I'll act as judge. I must say I favour the idea of going right in now and demanding them to give up their prisoner or prisoners, but I know that Macalister's strategy invariably works out right, and I am also aware that we seven white men might get a very warm

time from the inhabitants, who would justly resent our intrusion. I think, therefore, that we'll adopt the usual plan of deciding. Who's got a coin? Ah, thanks, Dandy ! The toss of this half-crown will settle the matter, boys. Heads, we go over the stockade now ; the reverse, we wait until darkness will hide our movements."

"And shure if it is neither heads nor tails that turn up we'll just leave the old Warden to his fate," said Irish Mike, and much to his surprise all laughed. But Mike was extremely good-natured, and after a moment's reflection, he laughed too. The fateful turn of the coin decided that darkness should cover the movements of the party, and on knowing this, Frenchy and Vic Charlie promptly lay down under a wild fig-tree and fell asleep. Fat Head and his comrades withdrew into the dense scrub and when satisfied that they were well hidden, produced their ba-baus, and smoked complacently. After all, they were fatalists. If the warriors of the village discovered the white fellows, they could run away if need be ; while if the white men were successful, they would each get a lump of sugar, and perhaps some salt from Macalister, besides any plunder which might be available when the warriors of the village fled or were killed.

Thus it was that when darkness fell over the great land of mountain and forest, the white prospectors climbed the stockade at a point previously

located by Macalister, and dropped inside the protected end of the village. The plan of campaign had already been settled and each man knew his part. Briefly this was to separate himself from his fellows, and work his way round and through the place until he discovered the tapu-house. This erection is usually the most imposing building in all villages, being the home of the people's gods, as well as a sort of town-hall, or prison. A system of whistle signals had also been arranged so that any man could instantly call up his comrades if required.

The night was very dark, for the young moon was hidden behind great banks of clouds which presaged a storm of considerable violence, and the noise of the rushing river drowned all other sounds. The Captain told Dandy to keep close beside him ; but as Macalister and all the others had also honoured him with the same injunction, all meaning to protect him at any cost, he objected strongly to keep near any one ; for he thought he was as well able to look after himself as any of his comrades, excepting, perhaps, Macalister, who, of course, had strategy to aid him, and whom Dandy looked upon as the shrewdest man he had ever met. The seven men quickly separated and made their individual ways forward into the village proper. Dandy had formed his own ideas as to the best method of finding out if there were any white prisoners in the place and he acted accordingly.

Although he did not know it, however, his comrades were all working on ideas especially their own, and some nearly coincided with his. He ran forward through the darkness and soon found himself among the houses, all built of bamboo and thatched with sago-palm leaves. Just as he reached the shelter of the walls of one of the biggest a tom-tom sounded out on the still sultry air, and at the same instant several torches flared brightly in the hands of some natives on a platform in front of a large building, illuminating the surroundings vividly. Dandy threw himself flat upon the ground and watched. Evidently some ceremony or entertainment was about to commence. Next moment he received a startling surprise. Sitting about the middle of the well-lit platform was a white man, evidently the chief !

CHAPTER VI

THE PROFESSOR

FOR a time Dandy thought he was dreaming ; everything seemed so unreal and so utterly absurd. He lay still and watched, and very soon had enough evidence to satisfy his senses that he was not taking part in a phantom drama or comedy. The ground on which he lay was evil-smelling, the atmosphere was so oppressively close he could scarcely breathe, and mosquitoes and other night pests tortured his perspiring skin to an almost unendurable extent. Lizards ran over his prostrate body, and scorpions, tarantulas, centipedes, and many other forms of life explored the recesses in his garments with most business-like methods. He therefore concluded that he was very much alive, and hoped that no night-prowling snake would come his way until he had grasped the meaning of the ceremony going on in front.

The white man was sitting on a raised seat on the veranda which fronted the building. Dandy was not so ignorant of Papuan ways as most of his comrades thought, and he knew that he was looking at the *Pouri dubo*, or tapu-

house, and that some matter of importance was being discussed by the people. But the presence of a white man puzzled him, and the fact that he seemed to be the chief was entirely beyond his comprehension. This personage was dressed in a manner which drew the lad's attention at once. He looked like a character in some burlesque production. He was wearing boots, long stockings, and knickerbockers, but a roll of turkey-red cloth formed his entire upper garment excepting a head covering of plantain-leaves skilfully woven together. He had an umbrella in his hand, which he used effectively as an agent of chastisement when some eloquent native became too discursive for his liking. It certainly seemed most probable that this incongruously dressed man had been the owner of the marooned helmet. He sat amidst the flare of the torches very wise and dignified despite his dress, and the attending warriors around him—seemingly his admirers—paid him great respect. They were garbed in the light and airy fashion of the country, however, a fibre kilt and a nose ornament completing their wardrobe.

But now a band of musicians was hard at work making night hideous with the sounds it produced from bamboo flute-like instruments, and from long wooden tubular drums, the ends of which were covered with snake-skins. The chief apparently enjoyed the music, for he kept time with his umbrella, and occasionally, as a particularly fine

passage was negotiated, nodded his appreciation. The music evidently was a prelude to more serious business, and when it suddenly ceased a stalwart native leaped upon the veranda from among the people forming the surrounding crowd, and began to address the chief in what doubtless was perfect Papuan style. The chief listened for some time, nodding his head as the force of the speaker's reasoning became obvious, but suddenly growing tired of so much oratory, he administered a blow with his umbrella upon the man's head, and the people laughed uproariously. The discomfited orator jumped back among his fellows, and another took his place and began expounding something or other to the umbrella-wielder. Soon he too was forced to resign his position, as was likewise a third and a fourth stalwart warrior. To Dandy it seemed as if the chief listened for a certain time to each man alike, and then applied the closure, but he also had the suspicion, somehow, that the chief didn't know what they said any more than he did. But the people were vastly amused all the same, and they always applauded the chief's decision. In time, the umbrella had dealt with over a dozen exponents of native logic, and no more were forthcoming. When this latter fact became apparent, the band struck up what doubtless was to native ears a wildly hilarious tune, but as the melody consisted of a series of monotone drum beats and some shrill blasts on

the bamboo flutes all on the same key, the effect was not greatly admired by Dandy. The concert ceased and the next act began, and Dandy soon forgot that he was not a legitimate spectator at some entertainment, although the pests did their best to remind him he was in New Guinea.

Two groups of performers now climbed up on the stage, and took positions on either side of the absolutely expressionless chief. At a sign from him they began their work, and Dandy guessed they were dancers. Wildly the rival parties gyrated, jumped and shouted, and the encouragement given by their respective friends among the populace was whole-hearted. But the silent chief was supreme judge, and after a time he arose from his throne and brought his umbrella into play upon the head of one of the dancers. That individual at once leaped from the stage and became lost in the crowd of scantily-dressed onlookers, who laughed loudly at his discomfiture. He soon had company, however, for the judge before sitting down had delivered a hasty tap on the frizzly-haired head of another dancer of the opposite side. The amusement of the populace was now continuous, for every minute the umbrella did its deadly work on the head of some unfortunate dancer, and at length the last man had been cleared from the stage. Then the dignified chief drew his turkey-red robe around him with the air of a Roman Emperor, and signed to the band with the all-powerful umbrella to do its duty.

It did, and the next candidates for popularity clambered up on the veranda. They were wrestlers, it appeared, and they looked splendid specimens of manhood. They set to work at once and the stage was crowded with swaying figures. In time the weaker or less skilful ones were laid low, and the victors pinned them down until the great and mighty judge gave them full credit. He did, with his umbrella, and eventually all those who had been successful were cleared off the stage. Amidst terrific applause the chief then proceeded to deal with those who had been unfortunate in the tournament, and certainly he could not be accused of favouritism, for he smote the latter with right good will, and Dandy wondered why the umbrella did not break. Again the band played, and a dozen fully-armed warriors took their places, and the hush that fell over the multitude was evidence that the forthcoming act was one of some importance. The chief seemed fully alive to this fact, and he glanced rather anxiously, Dandy thought, at each warrior as he passed in review before him.

That they meant business was apparent from the ferocious aspect of their clubs, but strangely enough they wore more in the way of garments than any of those who had gone before, and surely they could have fought better without their enormous feather headdresses. Still, a famous warrior has a certain dignity to maintain, even

at some personal discomfort, and probably this fact was responsible for their skins being partly covered. No time was lost in formalities, and when the band crashed out the appointed signal the stage instantaneously became a battle-ground, on which men, clubs, and headdresses were mixed up in hopeless confusion. Dandy was surprised this time. Hitherto the combatants or performers had arranged themselves fairly against each other, man to man, but the warriors were not following the same plan. Instead they were hitting each other indiscriminately, with absolutely no regard to what is termed fair play. The chief hovered around the fringe of the striving men, and when he got a chance used his wonderful weapon on any odd head that showed out prominently. But he was very discreet now, and he showered his favours impartially. The fight waxed fiercer and fiercer, and the yells of the warriors and the excited shrieks of encouragement from the people might have been heard, Dandy thought, half-way round the world. At length the unlucky fighters began to be weeded out, and one by one they were pitched headlong from the sacred precincts of the tapu-house, the judge invariably contriving to get the last blow at the fallen warrior. Soon after the battle on the stage was confined to half a dozen warriors, and they battered each other with an energy which Dandy knew was not the result of a vegetarian diet to say the least.

Another man was thrown from the fighting ring, then another, and the fervent exhortations of the multitude to their favourites among the remaining four were doubtless as terse and emphatic as they were loud. And the four fought violently and stubbornly, and the umbrella-wielder went in and out among them and endeavoured to make things easier for them by smiting any one who seemed likely to be the next to drop out. But he did not always succeed in his intentions. Suddenly three of the fighters combined against the fourth and bore him to the ground. The chief rushed in with his umbrella and raised it for a mighty smack upon the fallen one's head.

But something went wrong just then, for the prostrate warrior leaped to his feet again, and lifting one of his antagonists off his feet, hurled him out among the fascinated onlookers, then turning before the other two had collected their senses he struck boldly at the judge and sent him reeling back upon his throne. Next moment the battle was joined again, and almost immediately one of the two opposing warriors was pitched among the people after his comrade. The fight was now a duel between two men, and the people cheered until their throats could scarcely emit sounds. It was a terrific struggle, and Dandy again forgot his surroundings in watching it, otherwise he would surely have noticed that the storm-clouds had closed over the heavens completely, that the air had become

closer, and that even the pests had ceased to trouble him in their instinctive eagerness to get out of harm's way. He was lying on a piece of bare, hard ground to the left of the assembled populace, and so far as he knew no man was near him. In this opinion, however, he was rudely corrected, for just as the two fighters discarded their clubs and closed with each other in deathlike grips, a strangely familiar expression sounded out beside him. He wriggled round in surprise and found himself struggling with another man who was also lying prostrate upon the ground. But the other man was voicing his feelings in words, and this is what he said :

"Fight, you blamed cannibal, if you cyan, for begorrah, it's one of us only who will need any breakfast to-morrow ! "

"I think you are wrong, Irish Mike," gasped Dandy ; "we'll both need it, but none of us will get it. I'm the cook——"

"By the Dublin Fusiliers ! shure, an' I've gone an' done the thing this time," Mike wailed. "Oh, Dandy, why didn't yez say who yez were before? Shure, I didn't mane to hurt yez. Just kick me to show you are alive and bear no ill will."

"I can't kick you, Mike, until you take your weight off me. And there comes the rain, too ; we'll be drowned out."

"An' the people are clearing out as if somebody was coming round for a collection," said Mike. "I wonder where our fellows are."

His wonder was appeased very soon. The warrior who had first been discovered fighting against great odds, and who had treated the judge or chief so unceremoniously, had suddenly pinned his last opponent to the floor of the stage, and even as the rainstorm burst had gathered him in his powerful arms and thrown him out after those who had preceded him.

The people gave the best cheer they could work up under the circumstances, but the rain had started and they had no time to waste if they wished to gain the shelter of their piled dwellings or tree-houses with a healthy skin; well they knew the evils that resulted from being deluged by the first rains of the season, such rains carrying the deadly miasma of decomposing tropical vegetation and also laden with fever germs. They fled without a moment's hesitation, carrying the latest defeated warrior with them, and leaving only the half-sleeping chief and the victorious warrior on the stage. But the latter was in a hurry too, it seemed, although he didn't follow the others. Instead he put his fingers in his mouth and whistled out the signal agreed upon by the prospectors as a summons to gather round. As he did so the umbrella judge made another attempt to square matters by springing from his seat suddenly and striking viciously at the exultant warrior. But the blow didn't appear to have much effect, and the recipient at once turned and grappled with



HE GATHERED HIM IN HIS POWERFUL ARMS AND THREW HIM OUT
AFTER THOSE WHO HAD PRECEDED HIM.

the great chief. Clearly he had no respect for Papuan mammooses. He wrenched the wonderful umbrella from the other's hands and returned the compliment the chief had paid him, and the chief rolled back upon his throne, looking very sick indeed.

And now things developed rapidly. A couple of men appeared from nowhere, and Dandy in the act of climbing upon the stage himself recognised in them Vic Charlie and Frenchy. Irish Mike and he were only a second behind them, and next moment the Captain vaulted up, followed closely by Big Sam. The rain was now pouring down in torrential fury, and the air was almost non-existent. All the natives were now in their homes, doubtless rejoicing that the long-looked-for rain had at last arrived to restore their dying crops of taro, rice, tobacco, and other things, and possibly indifferent as to who the heroes of the evening's entertainment were. But the hero himself was very practical, and when the white men appeared upon the stage he said :

"Haul him away, boys ! I'm vera tired, for I'm no' used to being a nigger and their ways are no' our ways."

"Jumping beans, Macalister ! What in creation put you up to this game?" cried Big Sam. "I didn't spot you until you whistled——"

"Oh, it's an old trick o' mine," the victor laughed, discarding his headdress and flinging it

over the thatched roof of the tapu-house. "You see, I know the lingo o' the people around these parts, and I always carry enough 'coffee-bean stain to transform myself into a decent native if necessary. Of course I dispense with a ring through my nose, but in the heat o' a fight that omission is seldom noticed, and when it is, as I half believe it was to-night, I don't allow any time for close investigation."

"But your dress, Mac?" said the Captain. "How about it? And what is the mystery of the white man with the umbrella?"

"I took my dress from a native I caught who meant to join in the fight but whom I ultimately persuaded—gently, you may be sure—to leave his honour in charge o' a deputy. He is lying somewhere out there in the rain now, I hope, or my trousers are lost for ever, and I paid half a crown more than they were worth for them. As for his Highness of the Umbrella, he may be the Warden or he may be a madman for all I know, but you fellows might haul him away now for he looks a bit sick and I'm nearly played out."

"For any sake, Mac, go and get into your clothes!" admonished the Captain. "You are really not decent as you are, and we can see your white skin shining through your kilt—"

"Then why didn't you roll up sooner and give a hand to wipe out the other fellows?" demanded Macalister. "If you could tell it was me, it wasn't

very comrade-like to leave me to fight a whole tribe alone——”

“We didn’t know you,” reassured Vic Charlie ; and Dandy and Irish Mike added words to the same effect.

“Then carry this umbrella-man away while I go and look for my discarded garments,” said Macalister. “We canna wait here all night.”

He jumped from the platform and ran off into the darkness, and without comment the others caught up the white mamoose and carried him away. Apparently he was unconscious, but there was no time to waste in restoring him to his senses just then as the bolder warriors might return any moment. Meanwhile the rain continued to fall like a solid sheet of water, and the sky was shrouded with an impenetrable blackness. Through the village the men carried their rescued prisoner, but not one was quite certain in his mind as to whether the white mamoose was really rescued or made a prisoner now for the first time. He tried to reassert his lost authority before they had gone far, but without his umbrella, which Vic Charlie had appropriated, he was helpless, so resigning himself to his fate, he muttered a few words of expostulation in most mild terms and ceased to struggle. Soon he was hoisted over the stockade, and a few minutes after the men burst through the dense, soaking scrub into the cleared space where Fat Head and his helpers crouched,

shivering and half dead with fright, round the still glowing embers of the camp fire. They had thrown a tent-fly over their loads when the rain came on, and now were considering the advisability of running away. They were semi-civilised Papuans, and therefore had lost the good attributes of their still savage brethren, and not yet attained the reasoning powers of their white masters. But they had not been paid their wages, and they had been promised both sugar and salt on the morrow, therefore they were still waiting.

In a few minutes a billy of coffee was boiling, and just as Dandy lifted it from the fire Macalister rejoined the party, still in his native disguise, but carrying his own garments in his arms. All looked at him expectantly, but he volunteered no information, and Dandy silently passed round the hot coffee. Just then the strange white chief sat up and looked around. Fat Head was the first man he saw, and he promptly addressed him in a mixture of French, German, and English, which caused the poor chief carrier to implore Macalister's protection. Macalister at once interposed, but as the late hero of the umbrella cast eyes upon him he mumbled out some sounds which Dandy said were very like a prayer for the poor ignorant savage, and lay back upon the ground again. Then the Captain intervened: "You've frightened the man, Macalister," he said. "Remember he sees in you the ferocious warrior who

smashed him over the head with his own umbrella. I'll talk to him and explain matters and get his story. Warden or not, we must treat him as a white man——"

"He is not the Warden," Dandy interpolated ; "at least, he is not the man we saw in Flash Harry's camp."

"Who spoke?" exclaimed the man, sitting up suddenly. "Surely I heard an English voice?"

"Surely you didn't expect to hear Chinese, old man?" said Big Sam. "British prospectors usually talk English, you know——"

"That will do, Sam," the Captain interrupted. "Our friend hasn't had time to see that we are white men yet. Shake up the fire, Frenchy."

"Dear me!" ejaculated the late chief, staring at the white men now gathered round him and rubbing his eyes. "Surely I'm dreaming again. Are you gentlemen really white?"

"We are," the Captain assured him. "We are members of a prospecting party, and observing a helmet stuck in a snag down the stream, we concluded it belonged to a white man and came on here to see if we could be of assistance. I am sorry Mr. Macalister treated you so roughly, but you will admit his scheme was original, and perhaps any other method to bring you away might have proved futile. I presume you are the new Warden?"

The man looked steadily at the Captain for

some time before replying. Then he said: "I cannot quite understand matters yet, but I suppose it is a fact that I am among my own countrymen once more? That in itself is something, although what magic brought it about is more than I know. I'll see Kama about it; I didn't believe in his magic before, but there must be something in it."

"Don't you believe that," put in Macalister. "There's a good bit more in your old umbrella. I didna mean to bang you over the head with it, but you were always smashing at me and causing my men to be distracted from the work I had in hand at the time——"

"Somebody rub Macalister's legs with stinging plants!" Big Sam interrupted. "We're not holding this corroborree to hear him."

"If somebody tries any such trick, I'll eat him," retorted the Scot. "I'm no' going to put on trousers or wash my skin white until we have left this great city a good few miles behind us, and as I was saying——"

"Are you the Warden?" broke in Irish Mike, addressing the latest addition to the camp, "because if you are, begorrah, we'll pitch you back among the niggers again."

"I am Professor Brown, of London," came the answer. "Who are you?"

"Irish Mike, of any blamed place you like, prospector and camp cook, and—and—begorrah, I've forgotten what else I am——"

“You’re a General, Mike,” reminded Big Sam—
“General Nuisance, you know.” He edged away from Mike as he spoke. Mike was a very fine marksman with a piece of burning timber, and Sam might have received payment in full for his unkind words had not the Captain hurriedly interposed with the request that the Professor should drink some hot coffee.

“We are proud to know you, Professor,” he went on, “although we were not aware of the fact that you had become the mamoose of a New Guinean tribe. We saw your helmet down the river, as I have already said, and we reasoned out that its owner was in trouble, and came on at once to see what we could do——”

“You saw my helmet? Where is it? I don’t care much for these feathery headdresses. Moths and butterflies are my special studies, and living birds and—thanks, I *will* take some more coffee; it is a long time since I tasted that most excellent—that most excellent—I say that most excellent—— Dear me! I’ve lost the word—that most excellent——”

“I often feel the same way, too,” said Big Sam, “when I am trying to remember what Shakespeare said. Just call it Macalister’s skin dye for short, and we’ll all know what you mean.”

The Professor was greatly perplexed, but he drank the second cup of coffee. “You observed you had brought my helmet?” he remarked,

turning to the Captain. "Failing my greatly treasured umbrella, it would be a most useful item of dress to me now."

"I regret we forgot to bring it with us," the Captain said ruefully, "but we'll make a hat for you out of an old sugar-bag. Tell us, though, and quickly, what your presence in the village beside us means, for it is high time we were a good bit farther away from it than we are."

"Please don't hurry, gentlemen," said the Professor. "The villagers are completely under my control if I can find my umbrella. They are all most respectable people, and it would grieve their hearts sorely if they knew that we had not accepted of their hospitality. Let us go to them at once——"

"Some other day," Macalister grinned. "We have important business on hand in the meantime which prevents our paying social calls on cannibals. Oh, don't be afraid o' me, I'm no' a nigger; things and people are no' always what they seem."

The Professor had started violently when he saw who was speaking; evidently he still retained unpleasant memories of the hero of the village sports. The Captain was near, however, and he seemed to consider he was safe while under his protection. "I—I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I did not know you were a white man. I—I—that is, I am under the impression I have met you before, quite recently——"

"Your impression is correct. I banged you on

the head with your own deadly weapon, as I told you already, but there was no help for it if we meant to rescue you. Now if you will kindly say whether you think yourself rescued or kidnapped, we'll be able to get down to bed-rock much sooner."

"I hardly understand," the Professor said. "Am I a prisoner in your hands?"

"Certainly not," the Captain replied, "but we rather unceremoniously carried you away from the tapu-house of the village beside us and we now wish to know if you wish to go back or go ahead with us."

"Gentlemen, I think I grasp the essential facts now. By accident you have saved me from a very unpleasant position. I was the chief of the people whom you know, but to-morrow I had to fight a very skilful and powerful warrior who challenged my rights. He was to have fought to-night among the others, and I thought this gentleman was he and did my little best to assist the others to give him a bad time——"

"You mean me?" asked Macalister with a laugh. "If so you needna fear the warrior any longer. I caught him before the fight and borrowed the wardrobe I'm wearing, and I expect he's now making tracks to join some other tribe as fast as he can. I don't think he tumbled to his enemy being a white man, and he could never stand the disgrace of being defeated among his own people."

I would like to pay him something, though, for the hire of his clubs and clothes."

"Do you tell me that Bolo has left the village?" cried the Professor.

"Yes, he's bolted" Macalister replied. "Anyway, he wasn't where I left him when I went back for my trousers——"

"Then come with me, gentlemen. I can promise you that my people—I mean the people of the village—will do their best to entertain you. They are really very superior people, and their kindness and consideration to me has been of a nature I shall never forget."

"Possibly," grunted Big Sam, "but we're not having any kindness just now. You see, we're out after a big mountain of gold, and we haven't time to figure on your people's menu-cards. I think, too, you had better come along with us, and quick and lively too, for when the rain stops it's a pretty fair thing that they'll be out to look for their umbrella mamoose."

"You bet," said Vic Charlie. "It is a mighty powerful umbrella and they'll cut up rough when they miss it—— Is this breakfast, boys, or supper? 'cos if it's breakfast I'll eat more."

"You'll do no such thing, you glutton," roared Macalister. "You've already eaten more than is good for you. Let the Professor speak."

"Well, gentlemen, I really haven't much to say. I was a member of a scientific exploring expedition

which came to grief near here, after having found a great deposit of gold. I fear the men were all killed by a raiding tribe of fierce, unreasoning natives, and that I alone found the village near us now. The people were not unkind to me, and having been able to cure some simple troubles a few chief warriors were suffering from by giving them the contents of a box of pills, I suddenly found myself credited with the attributes of a god, and was made mamoose. I picked up the language a little and did my best to justify my position, but I have been always hoping to get away to report my great discovery to the world."

"You needn't worry now then," said Vic Charlie. "All the papers down south were filled with it, and that's why we're here——"

"Ha!" shrieked the Professor. "Has some man stolen my secret?" He sprang to his feet and paced round the fire in great excitement. Fat Head was lying near, and his body was the means of tripping the Professor, who, however, was up again in a moment, apologising most profusely to the terrified carrier chief, who had expected nothing short of annihilation for being in the great man's way.

"Fat Head mighty sorry, you bet," he said in reply. "Fat Head, hims tink Beefsteak no good, an' hims fight him any time."

The Professor stared at the speaker, but the fire, being damped by the deluge of rain, did not

give much light. Fat Head, too, was dressed in all Dandy's discarded finery, and looked the most important man in the company, as far as dress went.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the Professor said after hearing Fat Head. "It is difficult for me to realise that you are not a native ; your general air and your voice are most excellent imitations. I do not remember you in the fighting ring——"

Fat Head did not understand what was said, but he was terror-stricken, until Irish Mike approached threateningly with the words : "Clear out, Fat Head, or begorrah there will be a dead chief carrier in this camp."

Then the carrier's eyes lighted up and he smiled. "My word, you bet," he said. "Hims no want stay here. Hims all ready for march now." He ran over among his men and kicked them into activity.

The Professor was still much agitated, and the men wondered why he should feel so much perturbed at the knowledge of the gold deposit having leaked out, seeing he had said he had had comrades who could have given the news, and that he meant to tell the world, himself, in any case.

Macalister suddenly laughed. "What is the nature o' your great secret?" he asked. "We'll no' tell."

"A new bird I have discovered, the Paradisornis Brown," the Professor replied emotionally. "I named it after myself and hoped to surprise the

world with the news—— Dear me ! what are you gentlemen laughing at ? ” He paused and looked inquiringly at Irish Mike, Big Sam, and Vic Charlie, who seemed to have found reason for mirth all at once. Frenchy kept a stolid face, which fact showed he did not share the joke, and Dandy and the Captain were looking into the scrub as if they expected to see something there. Macalister preserved a grave countenance, however, and without allowing time for the amused men to speak, said :—

“ Keep your mind easy, Professor. The Paradisornis Brown is not yet known to the anxious world. It’s gold we’re after, and it was the news o’ your comrades’ gold-strike that sent us here.”

“ Yes,” put in the Captain, “ so if you are ready, Professor, we’ll get ahead. Afterwards you can decide whether you will return to your faithful people or go down to the coast with your important discovery.”

A few minutes later the prospectors, with their new friend and the carriers, were negotiating the crude-looking but cleverly constructed bridge across the river. Not a sound came from the river, but the rain still poured down in torrents. When daylight appeared ten miles lay between them and the village and the barrier range lay immediately in front.

CHAPTER VII

THE VALLEY OF GOLD

THE sun was slowly creeping up the eastern heavens, and dense clouds of steaming mist rose from the sodden forest land. The men had halted by the side of a small pool of accumulated rain-water, and the camp fire was speedily making ashes of the kind necessary for fancy cooking, the larder having been replenished with fresh fish, pigeons, a turkey, and some other forms of game just brought in by Dandy himself, Frenchy, and Irish Mike.

“But is it not extremely dangerous to health—I mean, is it not a direct invitation to fever for us to go about in soaking clothes?” said the Professor, wringing the water from his curious upper garment.

“It is,” the Captain agreed. “Take off your clothes, boys; we don’t want any fever in this camp.”

“Dear me!” the Professor observed, “I must apologise, but I—that is—I forgot to bring any change of clothing with me. Can any of you

gentlemen oblige me with a dry pair of nether garments? ”

“ Sorry, old man,” Big Sam laughed, “ but I reckon this crowd left its Sunday clothes at home too. I’ll send down to Sydney for my dress suit for you if you’ll wait a month or two.” He jumped into the pool as he spoke and began rubbing his clothes down with a piece of soap. “ It’s a lot easier washing them on one’s old bones than off,” he explained to the Professor. “ Just you try it.”

The Professor looked his amazement, but when the Captain, Macalister, and all the others except Dandy also went into the pool and soaped their garments prior to washing them on their persons, he turned to the cook, who was covered with flour in a pasty condition, and asked confidently : “ How will they dry themselves? ”

Dandy explained that he was not yet up to the ways of happy-go-lucky prospectors himself, being only a new-chum cook. “ You needn’t be afraid, however,” he added, “ of doing whatever the Captain or Mr. Macalister does, although I don’t know that the others wouldn’t play a trick on you or me if they got the chance. See, Macalister has forgotten he is black. He’s coming out of the water again, so I’ll go in and wash my clothes too. Do you mind keeping an eye on that damper in the ashes until I come back? ”

The Professor signified that he would do as requested and the big Scot approached. “ I have

just remembered that I am a nigger, Professor," he said, "and that I canna vera well afford to wash myself or my cocoanut fibre kilt. I happen to have a pair of trousers and a shirt, though, and if you'll accept the use o' them until such times as your own dry, I'll be vera pleased."

"I shall be very grateful, Mr. Macalister, but I fear you are depriving yourself for my benefit?"

"No' a bit; I prefer the native costume. It's cooler and it's vera convenient to be able to be a native when you want. Besides, when in Rome or New Guinea do as the Romans or the New Guineans do. Here are the articles o' dress I am dispensing with. Take great care o' them, for they cost a lot of money down in Paddy O'Brian's store in Esperance Valley camp."

"Thank you—er—Mr. Macalister. I assure you I will take great care of your clothes, and will not sit down oftener than I can help."

"Tuts, man! Have you no sense o' humour?" Macalister laughed. "I was only joking. Clothes are really superfluous in this country, as you will see when the boys come out of the water. Just look how cool and comfortable I am in my airy kilt."

"But what will our friends do until their clothes dry?" asked the Professor.

"Run about without them, of course; a few minutes on the tops of the trees where they will get the sun will make them as dry as some Austra-

lian rivers I know. But I see that damper in the ashes is burning, and the cook seems to have forgotten all about it."

"Dear me ! I promised to attend to it. What should be done?" The Professor ran over to the fire but stood there confused.

"You might send for the fire-brigade to put out the fire," Macalister laughed, "but seeing I'm here I'll act as cook for the time."

And he did, and to such an extent that when the men had finished washing their garments and had resumed them after drying them in the sun, an excellent breakfast was ready. To this all did full justice, including the carriers, who fell heir to what their masters did not want, and the Professor admitted that he preferred the white men's style of cooking to that which he had been accustomed to for some time past. Here, the erudite ornithologist told his story in detail, but the men had already guessed all that had not previously been told, much to the teller's amazement.

"Do you know the names of any of the people you were with on that famous expedition?" the Captain asked abruptly, after the Professor had talked fully ten minutes on the beauties of the *Paradisornis Brown* in a manner utterly unintelligible to the men, who, of course, were not troubled on that score.

"Well, no, you see, like yourselves, the men

had no names ; poor fellows, they are all dead now."

"Draw in your horses, old man," interjected Big Sam. "They aren't dead any more than you are, and I reckon they won't be until they find out what this reported discovery is worth. They have a good chance of pegging out mighty sudden if they have been yarning, for we left good claims to come here——"

"You'll remember I suggested as much before we started?" interposed Macalister. "I never believed——"

"No, we don't," interrupted Irish Mike. "I remimber it was you who insisted on us poor innocents lavin' Esperance Valley camp at once for fear the Warden would sthop us."

"Leave the poor Warden out in the meantime," put in the Captain.

"You are a perverter of the truth, Irish Mike," said Macalister, "and I call any man to witness——"

"Oh, fair play, Mac," cried Big Sam reproachfully. "You know you almost forced us to set out on this expedition. Didn't he, Charles?"

"My word, he did," agreed the Victorian. "He pestered the life out of us to get us away, and poor Frenchy hadn't even time to get back the pants he had loaned to Flash Harry."

"Zat ees true," cried French, "and zey vere vairy good pants."

“Just so,” smiled Macalister imperturbably. “Then I suppose I’ll get a handsome present from you fellows when we do find the wonderful golden valley? Clearly you would never have come but for me.”

“Howling snakes, boys, hear him !” cried Big Sam. “He’s taking the credit of this trip now, and we all know how he tried to block us. He’ll be saying next he knows where the place is. I reckon Macalister shouldn’t be allowed to yank out yarns as he likes.”

“And now that you simple and innocent lambs have wandered back to where we started,” said Macalister, “we’ll maybe get ahead.”

“Where did we start, boys?” inquired Vic Charlie, looking round his comrades’ faces perplexedly. “I started down in Melbourne, I know.”

“And I belong to old Dublin,” said Irish Mike. “Shure it’s the foinest town on earth an’ I’ll foight any man who says it isn’t——”

“Dear me, gentlemen,” interpolated the Professor, “what are you talking about? I understood the Paradisornis Brown was the subject of our conversation.”

“You mean a brown bird of Paradise?” said Big Sam. “’Cos if you do you’re worse than Macalister. There isn’t any——”

“Brown is my name,” the Professor interrupted, “and the word in conjunction with Paradisornis

indicates that I am the fortunate man who first saw the lovely creature : it has no connection with colour in any way."

"Still, I like to cook them like that," Charlie remarked. "They're fine if you get the real brown in the ashes."

"It's vera fine weather for this time o' year," observed Macalister, turning to the Captain, with most serious expression.

"Yes, but I shouldn't wonder if we got rain before long," he was answered, equally gravely. "Perhaps we'd better get on a bit."

"First I should like to ask the Professor if his party did find any gold," went on the Scot, noting that the men were listening interestedly, "and also if he can remember if one of the crowd spoke through his nose, and wore eye-glasses."

"That's Flash Harry, Mac," said the Captain. "What are you driving at?"

"Yes, that was the name of one of the leaders," the Professor cried, "and he spoke as you say and wore eye-glasses. Do you know him, and is he still alive? As for the gold, I suppose we found a great quantity. Nuggets the size of a man's head were lying everywhere, but I wasn't interested greatly ; I had already found the *Paradisornis Brown*, you see, and what was gold to me?"

"What, indeed?" said Big Sam. "What is it to any one? I tell you, boys, gold is the rottenest

stuff that ever was made. If I were a blamed, fat-headed old M.P., I would make a law that any man should throw away all he had——”

“And I would come round and gather it up and we’d divide afterwards,” added Vic Charlie; “and maybe we’d give Mike some, and Frenchy and Dandy, but I don’t think we’d let Macalister have any; he would only misuse it. All the same, boys, I’m mighty curious to know what Mac means about Flash Harry.”

“He means that a lot is now clear to him that was vera much obscured when we started from Esperance Valley,” Macalister began, “and some other matters have come into the story which entirely upset my previous ideas. In fact, boys, we’re playing parts in a deeper game than we know, but it beats me to make out the scheme. Doubtless, you don’t need to be reminded that Flash Harry was away from camp for over six months?”

“Yes, he was down in Sydney for a spell,” said Big Sam. “He reckoned he had a fair amount of fever on, and that the smell of the wattle-trees down in old Aus. would do him good. I don’t see what he has to do with any game.”

“You’ll also remember, maybe, that I rejoined you fellows in Esperance Valley only about six months ago?” Macalister persisted.

“Cut it off, Mac,” said the Captain. “All this leads to nothing, and you know you said you

wouldn't go back on the subject when it was under discussion last time."

"I am on a new subject now, Captain, and the Professor can settle the matter if he can rake up his memory a bit. I was in Samarai when Flash Harry passed through on his way south, and there was also in that township at the time a fellow who said he was a London financier. He came to me and asked if I could get him any properties he might float into companies in London, and after I told him the men worked their own claims and probably wouldn't sell he went to Flash Harry, for everybody in the port knew he was straight from the goldfields. What the result of his interview with Harry was I never knew, and shortly afterwards I came up to Esperance Valley and joined you fellows. Flash Harry, you know, returned to the old camp only last month." Macalister paused and glared around triumphantly. Evidently he thought he had explained everything.

"A mighty good story, that," Vic Charlie commented. "Tell us another, Mac. Don't sit down on that big centipede, though. Keep your mind on the fact that you haven't got trousers on, and that fellow will bite like a red-hot poker——"

Macalister sprang up from the log on which he was just about to sit, and a grin stole over his brown face. "That is a factor in favour o' civilised dress, after all," he said; "a cocoanut-fibre kilt is no' sufficient protection against exploring

creatures like this poor, wee thing." He lifted it on a stick and carried it into the scrub, where he deposited it with the words : " Don't you come back again, Mr. Centipede, or you'll be dealt with vera severely." He returned to the party, and gathering his kilt under him, sat down very carefully.

Then the Captain spoke, and his voice seemed to be slightly sarcastic. " Suppose you finish your yarn, Macalister," he said. " What has all you have said got to do with us? I presume you mean us to infer that Flash Harry and the Professor were in the same party, but even allowing that to be the correct assumption, it means nothing. British New Guinea is open to as many expeditions as care to come——"

" Not if the Warden can shtop them," grinned Irish Mike. " Shure and he's down on people who hurt the natives' feelings."

" Please leave the Warden out of the discussion," the Captain snapped irritably. " I think most of you fellows have got a touch of the sun ; Dandy is the only sensible man among you."

" What's wrong with Fat Head? " Vic Charlie asked. " I'm sure he's just bursting with sense——"

" Dear me, gentlemen," broke in the Professor. " What is all the talk about? Please don't quarrel——"

"We won't," Macalister assured, "but can you describe any other member of your bird-hunting party?"

"Well, he who seemed joint leader with the gentleman you know was a medium-sized man of powerful build; he had steel-grey whiskers, and I think had been in the British Army at one time."

"The new Warden!" gasped Big Sam.

"Ze man ve saw in Flash Harry's camp!" cried Frenchy.

Macalister smiled, and the Captain looked surprised. "Go on, Professor," he said laconically.

"I joined the party only at the last moment," the Professor went on. "They required an ornithologist of some note and I offered myself, for I keenly desired to see the birds of paradise in their native haunts. I was in Cairns at the time studying the bower birds and other rare specimens found near the Barron Falls. Well, we crossed to New Guinea and eventually got up here, my only regret being that we did not stop at several places where I saw one or two *Diphyllodis speciosa*. In fact, my comrades didn't seem to know birds at all, which was strange, and they certainly took no interest in what I thought was the chief object of the expedition. I am glad they are alive, however, and I will bracket their names with mine in reporting my great discovery."

"I shouldn't trouble if I were you," grunted

Macalister. "They'll no' appreciate the honour, I doubt."

"May the hungry cannibals feast on my bones if I can get the hang of what all the talk is about," growled Big Sam. "Can you cotton on, Vic?"

"Not a shandy's worth," replied his comrade in disgust.

"Shure an I don't wonder they cleared out and left the Professor," chimed in Irish Mike. "Begorrah! he's as long-winded as Macalister, and that's longer than a dozen burst bagpipes. I move we lose him somewhere."

"All right, boys, I'll say no more," said the Scot aggrievedly, "so we'd better get on the march again. Get up, Fat Head!"

"No, no," cried Big Sam and his twin-like comrade Vic Charlie simultaneously. "We apologise, Mac."

"*Oui, oui*," Frenchy approved, using his native tongue in his eagerness, for well he knew Macalister was keeping back some important point.

The Captain laughed. "I believe I see what you are driving at, Mac," he said. "You had better just get it off your chest, and then we'll get ahead again."

Macalister was at once mollified; indeed, Dandy suspected that he had only pretended to have been hurt in feelings. "My ideas may be wrong," he admitted magnanimously, "but here they are and I'll make no allusions to them again. In the

first place we are on a useless trip as far as finding the reported gold is concerned. The London fellow evidently got Flash Harry to undertake the job he wanted me to tackle, and as Harry thought he knew where to find good gold he got up a party of his own kind and came here. But he was afraid of being followed by curious miners, so he gave the party the appearance of a bird-hunting expedition, as is clear from the Professor's story, and thus threw every one off the scent. The story of their being attacked by Tugeris may or may not be true, but as they escaped it doesn't matter."

"But," put in Dandy, "they told the world of their discoveries when they got back to civilisation."

"They told the world of great finds of gold, you mean," corrected Macalister, with emphasis on the word "gold."

"But surely the difference is not much?" insisted the cook, "and gold is all any one here is interested in."

"My laddie, if they really had found gold they would have kept their secret. I know Flash Harry all right. Besides, he came back to Esperance Valley camp and never mentioned anything to the boys there, and none of them knew he had been out on a trip. No, even as when he expected to find gold he tried to make it appear that it was birds his men wanted, so when they found no gold they left the poor Professor to his fate for fear

he might tell, and announced that they had made a big strike."

"But what for?" asked Dandy, as the men gaped with astonishment. "What could he hope to gain by spreading such a report?"

"Just what I told you the last time we reasoned the matter out. Every man in Esperance Valley camp will be making tracks for this place now, and Flash Harry and his gang will rope in all the deserted claims and hand them over to the London company promoter. There is gold in them, at any rate."

"Howling centipedes, and tarantulas, and snakes!" gasped Vic Charlie. "I'll eat him and every London fellow I find."

"Begorra! What are we waiting here for?" demanded Mike. "It's high time we were on the back track; and by Dublin it won't be niggers we'll be foighting!"

"I won't say anything," said Big Sam with a strange gleam in his eyes, "but the man or men who have swung pegs round my old claim won't need any more tucker after I get back."

"But the facts, Mac?" put in the Captain. "If the man of military appearance who accompanied that mysterious party afterwards became Warden, and is now down in Esperance Valley acting as such, it seems, indeed, that some most powerful influences are working against us. I never thought that London capitalists could practically nominate

a Resident Magistrate in British territory they desired to exploit."

"They don't," said Macalister. "London capitalists are as straight, as a rule, as any men. They know nothing about this scheme, I'm sure, and would drop it in a minute if they thought any unfair game was being played."

"And Wardens, however much out of date, or inexperienced, do not lend themselves in the interests of anything which is not in the interests of the country they represent," said Dandy. "I, for one, think there are some mistakes in your deduction, Mr. Macalister. I do not believe the Warden ever heard of Flash Harry and his men."

"Good old cook!" sang out Big Sam, who was instantly echoed by Vic Charlie and Irish Mike, and a few seconds later by Frenchy, and later still by Fat Head, whose power of mimicry was great, like that of all Papuans.

"Yes, boys," continued Big Sam, "Macalister brought us here and now he's backing out of responsibility. I move we start on the back trail right now, and the cook can hold the inquests in Esperance Valley afterwards."

"Dinna talk nonsense, Big Sam," said Macalister, "nor you, Vic Charlie, for I can see you are just going to repeat your twin's words. All the same, Irish Mike, I should have thought your great reasoning powers would have——"

"Begorrah! you're smoodging now, Macalister,"

cried the Irishman, "and I won't shtand it. I am with Big Sam and Vic Charlie every time, and I have no reasoning powers different from theirs. You try your blarney on Frenchy and the cook but Irish Mike is not having any—at least, not to-day." The twinkle in Mike's eyes robbed his words of their apparent meaning, and the scantily dressed Scot laughed.

"Vera well, boys," he said. "You can go back and fight things out at the old camp ; meanwhile the cook and the Captain and your vera much abused humble servant, poor Macalister, will go on. But don't say I didn't tell you, afterwards. Come on, Dandy, this is no place for us——"

"Blow it all, Macalister !" roared Big Sam, "do you think you are going to get rid of us as easily as all that? I can see you want that blamed gold all for yourself. Well, you won't get it, for every man here is going to have his share even if he goes on hunting for the place for a year. Am I talking straight, boys? "

"You are," cried Charlie, Mike, and Frenchy, as one man. It was wonderful how unanimous they were in backing each other against Macalister, which, after all, seemed to Dandy to be an excellent tribute to the powerful, good-natured Scot. Of course he knew the two Australians didn't really mean all they said ; they backed each other loyally, right or wrong, and Irish Mike invariably agreed with them for reasons doubtless

quite legitimate from his point of view. His not to reason why, his but to support his comrades against the domineering influence of the Captain and Macalister. And yet all knew that the two leaders were always right. If such were not the case they would not have been acknowledged heads, nor would Macalister have been the victim of so much banter. But the Scot didn't mind in the slightest ; he knew his comrades well, and their seeming perverse ways were only a matter of amusement to him.

" Well, what are we going to do? " asked the Captain, after waiting in vain for some minutes to allow the Professor to speak. " It looks as if we have made a mess of this trip, for we can't fight Wardens. I happen to know something about these gentlemen, and their power is absolute."

" If I may speak," said Dandy, " I think we are jumping to conclusions rather rashly. It may be true that we are powerless if the Warden is fighting against us, but we have no reason to believe he is."

" Cooks shouldn't be allowed to speak," snorted Vic Charlie, apparently forgetting that he had held the position of camp cook before Dandy relieved him. " Hasn't the blamed Warden been causing us trouble all along? Didn't he send Beefsteak after us, and didn't he—— Blow him ! I forget what he hasn't done."

"I'll bet he hasn't done anything," said Dandy, "and that you fellows are talking rot. You're just like schoolboys!"

"Snakes and—and Professors!" exclaimed Vic Charlie. "Hear the kid! What will we do with him, boys?"

"Wash up for him," said the Captain. "You surely can't be down on a youngster for telling the truth."

"Oh, but I'm kicking against you and Macalister, too," protested Dandy. "Such utter nonsense as has been discussed in this camp is more than even a poor cook can stand. Macalister has proved nothing beyond the fact that the people who came here first had a reason of their own for not coming back. Let us go on and see for ourselves what truth is in their story."

"Begorrah, boys, who ever had a cook like ours?" cried Irish Mike in admiration. "Let alone going for us, he wipes out the Captain and Macalister, too! I vote we make him boss of this camp."

"Agreed!" the Captain responded at once. "He is level-headed and a good cook, and if responsibility is removed from me I can tell you boys what I think of you in a way that will surprise you."

"I wouldn't be anything else than cook here for untold gold," said Dandy. "I am enjoying myself too well as I am. But I must say that I do

not believe the Warden has any connection with Flash Harry's party."

"Nor I," added the Captain. "Explain that point, Macalister."

"I'm no' posing as a conundrum-solver," responded the Scot, "but doubtless the Warden has his reasons for what he does. Still, we're no' going back now; the promised land is over the ridge straight ahead, and we can reach it by sundown. Let us get to the spot and settle all matters. After all, I may be wrong in my deductions."

"What were they?" asked Big Sam. "Did you make out we would get gold, or that we wouldn't?"

"I'm sure I canna tell," Macalister answered dryly; "but whatever you say I'll bet against you, for I ken weel that you are bound to think the reverse o' what is really the case."

The men laughed, and Big Sam himself grinned. "All right, old man," he said, "I'll take you on. I'll bet the Captain's moustache we'll not find any gold; you have just told us that yourself, you know."

"Vera well," Macalister said, "I'll speculate my trousers on the idea that we will find gold. Hullo! where is the Professor? He's wearing them now."

"I am here," came an answer from a tree-top. I really believe I have discovered yet another *rara avis*——"



THE MEN WERE FORCING THEIR WAY UP THE MOUNTAIN SIDE.

"Throw it down and we'll roast it, then," Vic Charlie cried. "I have a fancy for that kind of stuff if well cooked."

"Well, are we to go on or go back?" interrupted the Captain. "The day is passing, and life itself is short."

"We'll see the thing through, Captain," said Macalister. "I've a bet to win. Kick up Frenchy and Irish Mike, Dandy, they've no fair reason for sleeping now, although the discussion has been dry. Come down, Professor."

Soon after the men were forcing a passage up the mountain-side. The scrub offered serious resistance at first, but that gradually became weaker and weaker, and finally ceased altogether. Then the men found themselves on the open, sun-scorched face of the great range, with no forms of life near but flying ants and jigger fleas. These were quite enough, however, to prevent any halt being made, and the Captain had a very trying time taking the necessary observations with his sextant. While he worked out the position Dandy took up the instrument and idly examined it, much to the amusement of the others, who each and all offered advice as to its application, although, excepting perhaps Macalister, none knew how to use it. Probably they had forgotten that Dandy had already used the same sextant to some purpose.

The Captain announced that they were heading direct for the position given of the great gold

discovery, and the cook supplemented the information with the statement that only three miles intervened, if the vertical slope of the mountain range were not taken into account.

"Eddication is a wonderful thing, bhoys," commented Irish Mike when they heard the news. "If I had not forgotten what I got at school shure and I would be a Warden now."

"Get out, Mike!" laughed the Captain. "How could you be a Warden? You would fight every man who said nasty things about you, and that would not tend to the dignity of your position."

"I recognise this place now," put in the Professor. "It was just where we left the forest that I saw the *Paradisornis Brown* for the first time."

"Yes," said Macalister. "When we get over the summit we'll see the happy valley all right."

"How do you know, Mac?" inquired Mike. "Shure you've never been here before?"

"A little mistake of yours, that idea, Mike," said Macalister. "I *have* been here before."

"What, Mac!" cried the Captain. "Do you know the place we are making for?"

"Fine; it is a valley, or rather an extinct volcanic crater just over the top. I prospected it years ago."

"Then you have certain knowledge that there is no gold there," said Dandy. "Why climb this mountain, then?"

"I have a bet to win, young man ; I never said there was no gold in this place, I merely deducted the fact that Flash Harry's crowd hadn't found any. Mind you, I don't promise that we'll do better than his people, but I've already mortgaged my vera necessary garments that we will find gold whether they found it or not."

"Just so, Mac," said the Captain with a yawn. "Meanwhile, we've got to get over the top of this little range, so save your wind, and if you know the best way up, take the lead."

An hour before sundown the summit was reached, and in front lay a circular hollow, clearly of volcanic origin.

"That is the place," cried the Professor excitedly ; "and see ! these great round lumps lying down there are the gold nuggets."

"Snakes !" gasped Big Sam. "We're millionaires now, and Macalister has lost his trousers."

Macalister grinned. "I named this place Danger Mountain, boys," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

DANDY'S BONANZA

IT was certainly a most remarkable place that the men gazed upon, and for a time they surveyed the scene in silence, none paying any attention to the Professor's excited cry. They were looking down into a cup-shaped depression which descended fully three hundred feet. It seemed to be about three hundred yards in diameter at the top, but it contracted greatly as the bottom was neared. On top the sides were black burnt rock, but lower, in the protection of the hollow, luxuriant vegetation flourished which completely hid the nature of the ground. Many round nodules of yellowish appearance were scattered promiscuously over the upper slopes as if they had been shot up from the bottom by some great force and had been arrested while rolling back. These were the nuggets which had drawn forth the Professor's exclamation, and no wonder. There were fortunes for every one in them, for, judging by their size, each would weigh about ten pounds troy weight, and therefore be worth between four and five hundred pounds in money. After some minutes

had passed in silent survey these boulders took up the men's attention, and a general rush down the slope was made towards them.

"I've lost my bet, Macalister," cried Big Sam, "and I'm mighty glad. Tell what it was and I'll pay——"

"Dinna be in such a hurry to pay, my man," Macalister advised. "I don't think you have lost your bet yet."

"Here, boys, this stuff isn't gold," howled Vic Charlie, the first to reach the cannon-ball-like nodules. "It's only some kind of blamed ironstone coloured with sulphur." He held one in his hands and drew his knife point across its surface. A scarcely perceptible scratch was the result, showing that the material was much harder than gold. In another minute each man was applying his own favourite test to the strange round formation, and a second later language fervid, terse, and wonderfully expressive resounded through the peaceful hollow. The stuff was certainly *not* gold.

"Well, boys, we've played the game to a finish," the Captain said with a forced smile, "and we have not come out winners. This is the spot given in the reports which prompted our expedition, and no doubt other miners from Esperance Valley and elsewhere will be arriving daily from now on. We've been had, boys, and nothing remains but to go back as soon as possible and endeavour to regain our old claims."

"And I get Macalister's trousers, after all," sang out Big Sam gleefully. "I've bested him, and I don't care though we never see gold again."

"You are a bit too previous, my man," said Macalister. "I haven't allowed that there is no gold here yet. It is true, as I thought all along, that the reported find is not what you fellows expected, but although Flash Harry made a mistake it doesn't yet follow that I have. We'll camp for the night and prospect the bottom o' the crater in the morning, if the Captain has no objections."

"I have none, Mac," the Captain said sorrowfully. "I have no claim to be your leader any longer, boys ; I led you here for nothing, it seems, and most likely, as Macalister has told us, we've now lost our old claims in Esperance Valley."

"Don't you worry, Cap," consoled Irish Mike. "Look at the fun we're getting, and anyhow we can get our claims back by appealing to the Warden."

"No blamed fear," Big Sam muttered savagely. "The Warden is in league with the people who spread the false report about this place."

"Surely not," put in Dandy, as also did Macalister.

"We thought he would try to prevent our little trip," the Captain said, "but I, for one, never believed Beefsteak's story. And I wish now that he had succeeded in holding us back."

"You'll maybe change your mind, Captain," Macalister said. "As I have told you, I've been here before, and I have half an idea that this wee bit o' the earth's surface is highly auriferous. Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we investigate."

"Isn't it wonderful how sensible Mac can talk at times!" said Big Sam. "I'm as hungry as a crocodile myself, too."

"And it's mighty cold up here," added Vic. "I vote we get down among the timber and start a big fire going, for as sure as all Wardens ought to be shot, the rain will be turned on again to-night."

An hour later the party was comfortably encamped in the hollow with a bark erection overhead to keep off the rain. Game of all kinds abounded in the scrub, and very soon an excellent supper of eggs, fowls, wild pig, rice, and hot tea was prepared, to which all did full justice. After the meal was over the men did not feel inclined to talk, and one by one they dropped off to sleep round the fire, even the quaint Professor not caring to further enlarge upon the *Paradisornis Brown*. Fat Head and his men were already coiled together under the shelter of some closely entwined branches, and a tent fly thrown loosely over all served as a blanket. It was cold at the altitude which the party had reached, and the prospect of being soaked with rain was not by any means

alluring. The moon was now about half full, and its weird light shone down over the silent hollow with ghostly effect. Soon, however, great banks of clouds rose from all points and obscured it completely, although its presence was still felt by reason of the occasional glimmer which pierced the rifts in the water-laden masses.

And the camp was asleep, sublimely indifferent to all things. Hostile savages might be near, danger in many forms might be threatening, and their mission had been a failure. But no one cared. They were prospectors, and everything was in the day's work. About midnight, however, just after the terrific downpour of rain had commenced, the Professor sat up, and Dandy, who was also awake, heard him mutter: "It was down at the bottom of this crater I found the *Paradisornis Brown*. I'll go down now and perhaps find out how the creature nests. I hope, though, that history won't repeat itself, and that I'll find my friends gone when I return."

Dandy was on the point of advising the Professor not to leave the camp and thus be sure that nothing would happen, but just as the learned one started out from the bark shelter Macalister sat up, and Dandy at once became interested in him.

"Aye, Professor," the Scot soliloquised, "history has a habit o' repeating itself, but no' always the way one expects who believes in that

doctrine. I'll see if I canna make it do the repeat trick now." He got up and followed the Professor.

"I suppose I had better follow Mac," mused Dandy. "He has some game on, I know, and possibly I might be of assistance." He lay back suddenly. Irish Mike, Frenchy, and Vic Charlie had assumed a sitting posture, and their rifles were in their hands. They might well sleep soundly at times, but they became wide awake in an instant.

"What is it?" asked Charlie. "Are we rushed by the niggers?"

"No," Frenchy answered, "but Mistaire Macalistaire has just gone out wiz his gun."

"Is that all?" grunted Charlie, falling back upon his blanket again. "Then we needn't worry if he's on the watch. He'll smell danger if it is a week distant." His confidence in Macalister was refreshing after all he had said.

"That's thrue," admitted Mike, "but shouldn't we keep an eye on him all the same?"

"No," spoke Big Sam, sitting up. "If old Mac cannot look after himself there's not any man here can help him much. Lie down and sleep till the cook calls us."

But the cook had already decided that breakfast would be late next morning, and as soon as he thought the men were asleep again he crawled out from the fire, and, rising to his feet, fell into the Captain's arms. "It's all right, Dandy," the

latter said reassuringly. "I've been keeping an eye on Macalister all night, so you needn't worry. Go back and have a good sleep."

"With your permission, sir, I should like to follow him," said Dandy. "I know he can easily do anything himself, and that he can meet all possible dangers ; still, sometimes a lucky shot from somewhere might be an advantage."

The Captain looked at Dandy closely. "You are right," he said. "A well-aimed shot is sometimes of great service, but I don't think there will be any call for your excellent marksmanship this time. If I thought there would be, I would order you back to bed, but as things are you'll only get half drowned in the rain. Come back before daylight, or all the boys will be out looking for you, and whatever you do don't go over the ridge. Anywhere in this hollow a shout will bring us all to your side, and perhaps you may find something special for breakfast."

Dandy thanked the Captain and glided away out of reach of the spasmodic flickers of the camp fire. He got into Macalister's track with an unerring instinct that would have surprised his comrades greatly, and hurrying through the broken scrub which the Scot had already negotiated, he soon found himself immediately behind the daring one. Then suddenly Macalister disappeared, and while Dandy was looking around in the drenching darkness wonderingly,

something caught his feet, and he fell heavily forward into the arms of a powerful warrior. The warrior, however, was Macalister, as Dandy knew next moment when he spoke.

"Will you never learn strategy, laddie?" he said. "You would have no more chance against a cannibal fellow, tumbling into his hands like that, than he would have running up against the business end o' a rifle in working order. See, he would just lift you off your feet like this, and throw you against that rock like—— Mighty me! I forgot it was you, and I nearly did it. You've got a most extraordinary grip o' a fellow's throat for one o' your age and size, Dandy."

"In fact, Mac, was it not that grip that made you suddenly remember I was your comrade?" gasped Dandy, as the Scot replaced him on his feet. "I was not nearly so helpless as you thought, and if you really had been a native you would likely have a very sore throat by this time."

Macalister laughed. "It's no' just vera comfortable as it is," he said, feeling his neck tenderly; "but, laddie, a savage would never allow you a chance to seize him by his windpipe and play scientific tricks with it. He would talk to you with his club as you fell, and a good serviceable spiked club is sometimes vera eloquent——"

"In any case, Mac, I'm here, and I'm going with you," Dandy interrupted. "I saw you leave camp, and I want to have a share in any game

you are going to play. I'm not afraid, and I'll do exactly as I am told."

"Enough, Dandy ; I'm vera glad to have your company ; but mind, no reckless single-handed moves ; we're working for the whole camp, and we canna afford to take risks."

"Dear me, Mr. Macalister ! What risks can there be ? We are in the crater of an extinct volcano, it seems to me, and no danger can come along except over the top. We are almost at the bottom of the cup now, and there are no natives near us, or in the entire hollow, excepting Fat Head and his carriers."

"Maybe no', Dandy, and yet I wouldn't wonder but that you'll have reason to change your mind before long. I've been here before, you know, and I happen to have the knowledge that this volcanic hollow is a place where the head-hunting Tugeris meet at certain times to perform some rites either religious or devilish. I know, for I've taken a vera prominent part in the ceremony, and I'm no' burning with desire to do the same again. As for danger only coming over the top, that is a point I'm no' prepared to agree on, but I have grave doubts that it may also come in near the bottom in the shape o' howling savages. The Tugeris, you know, are no' exactly peace-loving, gentle creatures who can be controlled with an umbrella."

"What on earth do you mean, Mr. Macalister ?

"We can see there are no natives here, and surely they won't come in this rain?"

"No, Dandy, you're right in that last respect. These bloodthirsty warriors are afraid of getting their headdresses wet. But they may come by a route which prevents that awful possibility, and if so they certainly won't come over the top of the ridge. Of course I have no positive knowledge that they know the other road, nor have I any reason to think they will come at all, except that the whole country is up at present and all the tribes are conspiring against the invading prospectors. They will know this, and may attack us in the hope that their work will be blamed on the other less savage, yet less brainy peoples who dwell around here, for there is no doubt the new Warden has made a big mistake by giving the natives reason to think he is against white men coming into their territory. They argue, doubtless, that if the great white chief has turned against his own people, they may kill them where they find them with impunity."

"But if the Warden has not made the mistake you fear, Mr. Macalister?"

"Well, he's getting full credit for it, anyway, and wireless telegraphy is no' a science confined to civilised Powers which own *Dreadnoughts*. I know messages have been flying about from hilltop to hilltop pretty frequently of late, and it doesn't need a Sherlock Holmes fellow to guess that we're

kept well in touch. I don't blame the Warden, though, Dandy ; I think there is some great mistake somewhere."

"But your secret route is here? Did you mean that you know of another passage?" Dandy was certainly surprised.

"Aye, and here it is. Crawl under these branches on your left, and don't touch the fronds any more than you can help or you'll no' forget having done so for a month, for they sting like red-hot needles."

Dandy obeyed without comment, and wriggled fully twenty feet along the dry ground under the dense stinging scrub which formed an impervious roof two feet above the ground. In time he reached the rocky walls of the side of the hollow, and found his further progress barred by the damp, slime-covered formation. Snakes and other crawling creatures scurried away as his hands or feet touched them, and it required a great effort of will power to refrain from voicing his repugnance when he felt some wriggling monstrosity underneath him. "I can't get any farther," he called out, as he realised that solid rock only lay ahead. A match flared up beside him and Macalister answered: "Oh, yes, you can, but you've got to know the magic formula. Now I'll take the lead ; keep a hand on my foot and follow closely, and hope there are no unpleasant animals or insects in the way for any sake, for a fibre kilt and a

coat o' coffee-bean stain are no' just the vera latest improvement in the way o' armour plate." Clearly Macalister had experienced the truth of what he said during the passage under the scrub, but his words made Dandy laugh outright.

"It's all vera well to laugh, my man," Macalister said reproachfully, "but if you were in my shoes you would be nearer greetin'."

"But you haven't any shoes, Mac," cried Dandy, still laughing. "The Professor is in them now, I think."

"Exuberance o' spirit is all vera well in its ain place, my man," said Macalister, "but hilarity such as yours at present betokens a callousness decidedly detrimental to the favourable impression I had previously formulated regarding you."

"Please, Mr. Macalister, I'll never laugh again," Dandy said contritely. "I didn't know it was so bad as all that. I am only a poor, half-educated person of little account, and—and—but you do look funny in match-light crawling on your bare knees."

"Possibly," grunted the Scot, "but believe me, however funny I may appear to be, I feel much colder. At this altitude a kilt like mine, while maybe healthy, is no' equal to Scotch tweed trousers. But we'll let that pass. You are now about to gaze upon the scene o' some former exploits o' mine; just unhitch my foot from your fist a minute, I need my feet for climbing." He

stood up, and doing likewise Dandy found that a rocky roof was now overhead instead of the nettle scrub. He was not allowed time to wonder where and when the change had been effected, for Macalister was already pulling himself through a hole in the roof that looked much too small to allow of his passage. But he got through and reached down a hand to Dandy. "Come on," he said, "there's a cold draught here that is vera severe on my bare limbs ; work yourself through here and we'll soon know whether we've come here for fun or for gold."

Dandy was an athlete of no mean order, and he leaped through the irregular man-hole with an agility that brought forth a brief commendation from Macalister which made him feel very pleased with himself. Well he knew that the powerful, self-possessed man whom his comrades delighted to tease did not bestow praise where it was not earned, and he was happy indeed to think that he had pleased the big Scotsman. He followed his leader along the cavern they had entered from beneath until its walls contracted so much that they had again to crawl. What they were going to do or what purpose their cave-exploration would serve he did not know, nor did he care at the moment. After a period of crawling, in which both men fought with all sorts of unseen creatures for the right of way, Macalister spoke from ahead, saying, "Have you got your rifle, Dandy?"

"Yes," the lad answered. "Are we likely to use it?"

"One never knows what is in front. You can stand up now, I think, and I'll light the torch I've carried from the camp. There's a vera cold draught o' air blowing round my poor legs, Dandy; do you know what that means?"

"I suppose it means you should wear the garments to which you are accustomed," Dandy replied. "Personally I think trousers are as good as anything for keeping off cold airs, but possibly you are trying some new scientific cure for obesity or insomnia or something else."

"You're frivolous again, Dandy, and let me tell you such a propensity is no' in keeping with the dignity you should maintain."

Dandy started violently. "What special dignity have I to maintain, Mr. Macalister?" he asked. "I am with you, and surely that is enough; I can't help laughing at times, and even now I answered your question as fairly as I could."

"Did you? I should have thought that a man o' your powers o' observation would have known that this current o' air meant far more than the fact, admitted, that I ought to be wearing trousers. It means, Dandy, that there is another opening on the outside o' the mountain, and that we are now in a tunnel leading right through the range we crossed. It is by this passage that any performing Tugeris will come, and it is also in here that I hope to win my bet with Big Sam."

Macalister swung a torch into flame as he spoke, and a weird scene was revealed. The two adventurers were in a huge cavern, the roof of which was fully a hundred feet above their heads. Many holes in the jagged walls indicated the presence of other caves, and several huge blocks of rock rising from or resting on the irregular floor divided the cave in which they stood into shadowy compartments. A stream of water gushed from some point high up in the walls and fell in a shimmering cascade into a pool on which the torch-light did not shine. The size of the cave could not be determined, as the feeble flickers of the torch only served to intensify the darkness lying beyond their influence. Dandy was impressed, and for a time was as silent as his comrade. Then his active brain began to work, and a multitude of thoughts assailed him. How could a cave of such size exist in the walls of a volcanic blow? What agency had formed the cavern if it were not the result of volcanic action? And in either case how could there possibly be gold anywhere near, as Macalister seemed to think? Then how did Macalister happen to know of its existence? What strange drama had he been taking part in when he made the discovery? All was an inexplicable mystery, and Macalister himself was not the least part. He seemed to know everything, was always cool, good-natured, kindly, and ever ready to act. He was also inclined to be secretive, yet was gifted with

a strong sense of humour, which, however, being of the Scotch variety, was not always understood by his comrades. Dandy mused on for some time until his companion's voice broke his fancy's flight.

"Be vera careful how you plant your feet, Dandy," were Macalister's words. "Although it is no' evident, perhaps, there is a sheer drop just in front o' about a hundred feet, and if you take it suddenly the camp will mourn the loss o' a good cook. Just follow me, and don't dream any more than you can help, and we'll get to the lower level all right."

"Very well, I'll stick to you like some of the leeches we met down on the river swamp," Dandy replied. "Go ahead, and don't worry about me. I hope we'll be back in camp in time to prepare breakfast, however. The boys may want to sack me if I don't attend to my duties to their satisfaction."

"Don't you worry about the boys, Dandy; better mates never lived, and anyway we're working in their interests now. Ah! Go slow, we are on the edge." Macalister held his torch aloft and its flare lit up, partly, a yawning abyss immediately in front. A cold air blew upon their faces, and the sound of the waterfall was like the continuous roll of many drums.

But Macalister never hesitated. "I have travelled this road before," he said reassuringly, "and I took vera careful note o' everything. Drop

your feet over this ledge after I've negotiated the first little bit, and feel for another ledge before you let go."

Dandy answered to the effect that he would never do the uninterrupted journey to the bottom so long as his hands could retain a grip, and next moment Macalister swung into the great gulf of darkness. Dandy followed as directed, but he held on to the edge of the ledge until his feet found rest about five feet below. "You're all right, laddie," Macalister spoke from a point still lower. "Just repeat your last performance, and the rest will be easy, although I'll no' promise that our return journey will be like walking along George Street, Sydney, or Princes Street, Edinburgh."

Dandy successfully gained the next ledge, and then, as Macalister had said, the downward track was easier. He followed his leader along a descending ledge which only occasionally was broken by clefts or interrupted by masses of rock. It was seldom more than a mere foothold, but by hanging in to the rocks Dandy had no trouble in keeping at Macalister's bare heels. The former individual still carried the torch, and its light served to show that a single step misplaced would launch one into a chasm the bottom of which as yet was unseen.

But neither took that step, and after a long and tedious journey which seemed to Dandy to lead right round the cave in a descending spiral, Macalister announced that they had reached bottom.

And so it seemed, for a comparatively smooth floor now lay in front, though only imperfectly seen in the torchlight. Macalister sat down and lit his pipe, and Dandy sat beside him. "This is a fine change from the scorching heat o' the outside world, Dandy," the former remarked. "It would make a vera fine summer resort for the people o' Esperance Valley. Have you ever been in a snowstorm without trousers on?"

In spite of all efforts to restrain himself, Dandy laughed. "No," he said; "you see, I've not had much experience of snow even with all my clothes in practical use. But if you feel like dispensing knowledge, Mr. Macalister, I should like to ask some questions."

"Fire away. I'm a regular storehouse o' useful information, and I charge nothing for giving it to those who ask for it. A pipe is a grand thing, Dandy, but I see you don't smoke."

"Well, I am very curious to know if this cave was formed by volcanic action. And if so——"

"It wasn't, laddie; it was formed by the action o' carbonic acid gas. The space that this cave represents was once filled with limestone, and the rain-waters o' more centuries than your history-books can tell, percolating through from the outside, gradually carried it all away in solution, the carbonic acid gas resulting causing a deposition o' minerals in the lodes in the more stable country around."

"But surely the hollow outside is a volcanic crater?"

"I have no doubt it is, laddie; but if you examine this place closely you'll see that it has no connection with next door. I canna say I'm a skilled geologist, but I've used my powers o' observation all my life, and possibly I know from experience some things about this part o' the world that geologists who have never left Britain's shores don't dream of. Probably the Professor could give you more information on that subject, but I can only say that it seems to me there have been two distinct periods of upheaval here. This mountain range was elevated first with its limestone formations and everything else, then an earthquake came along and caused some changes. I fancy that, obeying the law of following the line of least resistance, the volcanic disturbance burst open the earth's surface just between the lime formation and the ordinary quartz rocks. The hollow outside was most likely only a cleft in the rocks at first, but lava and other stuff ejected from the fissure, filled in and completed the circle, thus forming the crater as we have seen it. If I am wrong I should like to have a few minutes' argument with the fellow who can correct me; if he could answer my questions he would give me much knowledge I've been looking for for a long time."

"Supposing this cave *is* of an age having little or no connection with the forming of the hollow,"

Dandy asked, "what is there in it to mark the difference?"

"Gold, laddie, I think, and we're going to settle that point now. If I haven't been mistaken, and therefore lost my bet with Big Sam, you'll find some veins of the auriferous metal running along the face of that wall over there. It is true I didn't get a chance to investigate thoroughly when I was here before—the Tugeri people are no' vera considerate, you know, and I was a prisoner in their hands—but my instinct is seldom wrong in matters in which gold is concerned. We'll go over now and see."

"Were you a prisoner among the people said to have attacked the Professor's party?" asked Dandy in surprise.

"Yes, but fully a year before, and I can tell you that the Lords of the Mountains, as the fierce Tugeris are called, are no' just so easily dealt with as our old friend Beefsteak. However, as you see, I managed to leave their company; their ideas and mine were hardly the same, and my Sunday-school training didna allow me to fall into line with them on points where we might otherwise have agreed. But come along, this is no' the time nor the place for moralising, and it is certainly not for lecturing." Macalister arose and walked across the rocky floor, and Dandy obediently kept close behind him.

"There now," the Scot suddenly said, flourish-

ing his torch along a wall face. "What do you think that stuff is?"

"You mean those streaks in the rocks? Why, surely that is gold!" Dandy answered. He applied the point of his sheath-knife to some of the larger glistening particles in the narrow seams, and instantly cried: "And it is gold! Great Scot! there are several fortunes here!"

"Aye," replied Macalister, "so I thought, and I have won my bet after all. What was it about, do you remember?"

"I really don't know. What was that? Listen! Surely that is not the boys shouting on us?"

"It's more like a mob o' hungry cannibals on the hunt for their supper, laddie, but I expect it's only the noise o' the waterfall striking us at a different angle. But there *is* gold, laddie. Take what you want and be happy ever afterwards, as the story-books say. We'll call this place Dandy's Bonanza!"



"WHAT WAS THAT? LISTEN!"

CHAPTER IX

THE WIPE-OUT

“BUT it is your find, Mr. Macalister, and it is surely one of the biggest ever made. It is Macalister’s Bonanza !”

“Tuts, laddie ; dinna be as perverse in spirit as Vic Charlie or Irish Mike. My name is advertised more than I want pretty well round this weary world already. You’ll find ‘Macalister’s Strike’ in Klondike, ‘Mac’s Luck’ in South Africa, ‘Macalister’s Last Chance’ in Western Australia, and ‘Macalister’s Reward,’ the poorest show of them all, in North Queensland. No, my boy, from the Arctic to the Antarctic, and from China to Peru, I’m vera weel known, perhaps no’ always to my credit, but then, you know, even a Macalister can make mistakes, and whiles I allow my temper to get the better o’ me. If you half kill a man, even though he may deserve it, you canna expect his friends to sing your praises——”

“I know that much,” put in Dandy ; “but right eventually triumphs——”

“Aye, so it appears—on your tombstone ! Now, Dandy, I could fire off a vera learned discourse

here on the vanities and other shortcomings o' poor humanity, and if Big Sam or Charlie were here I would be sorely tempted to do it. But as you don't seem excited overmuch and are as cool over this gold business as if you didn't want any, I'll spare you. Gold is no' everything, and a true comrade is worth tons and tons o' it."

"Oh, I am not excited, Mr. Macalister, simply because you are not. I must say I value gold as highly as most men, but still, I would prefer such a comrade as you have described to a good amount. And now I have you and the boys ; so gold, after all, is very poor stuff."

Macalister laughed and swung his torch into a greater blaze. "For a town-bred laddie, Dandy," he said, "you've got a wonderful stock o' the kind o' sense called common by most people, but which really is vera uncommon. You can earn all the gold you need as a camp cook anywhere in the wild places o' this earth where men still congregate to wrest from it, instead of from their fellow-men, the yellow dross so much desired by most people. Now, seeing we've both declared our utter contempt for the auriferous stuff lying before us, and made quite clear to each other that we don't particularly want it, we'll stick in and get as much as we can to take back to the boys, so that they will come and help us to get more. Meanwhile, and for all time, this place is christened by its finders 'Dandy's Bonanza.'"

"Very well, Mr. Macalister, Dandy accepts the honour, but he will make it his duty to see that your name and fame go down to posterity, with all the honour both observe. My people are influential over in Australia."

"Say no more, laddie ; I dinna care a hair o' a Chinaman's pigtail for fame. But these are awful sounds. I wonder what they can mean. I never heard falling water make a noise like that before, but I suppose the echoes in this cave will be answerable for the discord. Maybe we'll get used to it in time. We'll see if we can get some gold now, and go back to camp."

They dropped on their knees and closely examined the gold-carrying seam which ran in a slanting line through the rocks. It was well defined, and measured about eighteen inches in breadth. Through its face were scattered particles of gold of sizes ranging from mere specks to pin-heads. So closely were the minute "colours" packed that the whole belt looked like a solid mass of the precious metal, but even Dandy knew that such was not the case. The strange noise was not now noticeable, probably because they had grown accustomed to it, or, while lying low on the ground, were protected by some sound-deflecting barriers from its influence. At least, so Dandy thought when he first became aware that the cave had become strangely silent.

The seam in the rock face which carried the gold

was of a soft, gritty formation, and Macalister and Dandy dug out quite a lot with their knives. The "dirt" came away in flakes which crumbled into fine powder as it fell upon the ground, and through the entire mass the gold gleamed like spangles on the dress of a pantomime fairy.

"There must be an enormous quantity of gold here, Mr. Macalister," said Dandy, after a long period of silence.

"Aye! there's a fair amount, laddie. But drop the 'Mr.' when talking to me if you please; I am no' used to it, and it doesna fit me. 'Mac' is the handle I get from my friends, although I exact the full 'Macalister' from those who don't belong to that little crowd."

"All right, Mac; I am proud to be numbered among the chosen people; but why don't you enthuse just a little? I calculate there must be at least a thousand tons of this conglomeration here, and I am sure it carries five ounces of gold to the ton."

"Do you mind telling me how you arrive at your conclusions, Dandy? I didn't know *you* could estimate the amount o' gold in a seam."

"Oh, I'm not quite so ignorant as some of the boys may think," laughed Dandy. "I passed through the School of Mines, and put in some time underground in one of the big North Queensland mines. My people thought of making me a Mines Inspector at one time."

"But instead they made you——"

"A camp cook, it seems ; and I'm glad. If I couldn't have taken on the job Vic Charlie wanted to get free from, I should not have got the chance to come with you fellows, and would, therefore, never have known you, Mac."

"I don't know about that, laddie. You were going to join Flash Harry's party when you struck our camp ; I expect we'll meet his merry men before long. I must say that I don't yet understand Harry's game, for I always found him a straight man."

"Look here, Mac ; I'm only the camp cook, of course, and it is rather cheeky of me to speak, but how do you know that he isn't straight still? It is no crime for a man to go out prospecting without informing the world of his intentions."

"No, but it *is* to come back and allow a report to be spread that nuggets of gold the size of cannon-balls were found."

"But we have only the Professor's story as to the cannon-ball nuggets, and he admits he was not much in the party's confidence. Is it not possible that Flash Harry's men found this place where we are now——"

"No, laddie," Macalister interrupted sternly, "I found this place last year, and it was I who told Flash Harry there was gold in the vicinity o' the crater outside, and it was doubtless that information that made him come here. He never saw this cave, as I can vera easily prove."

"How, Mac? What proof can you give that he did not stand where we are now?"

"By drawing your attention to the gold-washing pan you see in that side cave a few feet to your left, and the few other mining tools lying beside it. Most of them bear my initials, and no second finder would leave them there as evidence against his claim of discovery. But you estimated there were a thousand tons of this gold-bearing conglomeration here; how did you get your figures?"

"By a simple calculation I was taught down in Australia. That seam is a foot and a half across, and being of a silicious nature will be light, probably only going twenty cubic feet to the ton. Well, I call every fourteen feet in length equal to a ton, therefore, and that is giving very good measure so as to make sure, and then we have only to find out how many times fourteen feet will divide into the whole length to know how many tons are exposed to view."

"And as the length of this wall face is only somewhere near a couple of hundred yards," said Macalister, "and fourteen divides into six hundred feet only forty-three times, no' to worry over an odd fraction short, that looks as if we had only forty-three tons o' ore in sight, which at five ounces to the ton is only over two hundred ounces or eight hundred sovereigns."

"You are only trying to show up my ignorance, Mac," Dandy laughed. "If the seam only ex-

tended back into the rocks one foot, your assumptions as to the value would be correct. But you have already proved by your previous explorations in this rabbit's hole of a cave which pierces the wall that it reaches back at least twenty feet so if you multiply all your figures by that twenty, and allow that the auriferous seam probably does not end just where the hole ends you'll see that my estimate of a thousand tons is fairly near the mark."

"Aye, laddie, you're right, I believe. I like to make a man give reasons for his statements, but I see you know all about gold reefs, fissures, and deposits. I would point out, however, that it doesna always follow that although you prove the depth of a lode at one point it continues along the strike. However, I may as well say that I think it does in this case, and, moreover, that it runs far out towards the outside of the hill past what we see, and also into the heart of the mountain, underneath. But we'll just make a test o' the gold contents now, so that we can tell the boys exactly the worth o' Dandy's Bonanza."

Macalister crawled into the cave in which lay the mining tools he had left there previously, and on returning charged the gold-washing pan one half full with the powdered excavated "dirt" Dandy and he had dug out. "From long experience, Dandy," he remarked, "I know to an ounce or two what this pan now holds, and as

we have no scales or weighing apparatus of any kind you'll just have to take my word for the results unless you can check them yourself."

"I'll believe what you say, Mac. I'd trust you before any assaying plant worked by more or less skilled men."

"Vera well; we'll take some gold back to the boys at any rate as evidence of the wealth of the promised land; you will observe, Dandy, that history is again going to repeat itself, for didn't two fellows go prospecting in advance before somewhere, and didn't they bring back samples o' the unknown land's produce?"

"You mean an event that happened about five or six thousand years ago in Asia Minor?" Dandy asked. "If you do, please remember we're not looking for grapes, or even milk, or honey; we can get the fruit of the vine in plenty down on the coast, the milk in tins with a picture on the outside in addition in camp, and the honey in almost any hollow tree that rears itself in the flowering scrub along the river's banks. Times have changed since the time of those two prospecting Hebrews, but whether for the better or not I cannot say."

"You're becoming vera long-winded, Dandy. Verbosity is no' to be commended in one so young and innocent as you; besides superfluity o' language is a characteristic o' those who don't know what they are talking about. Now, I'll bet

my kilt, and it's made o' the best fibre, that you don't know the names o' the two gentlemen you have brought into our most edifying discussion? "

"Then you've lost, Mac ; their names were——"

"Just so," Macalister interrupted. "Julius Cæsar and Robbie Burns. They were a most wonderful pair, weren't they? I've lost my kilt, laddie ; do you want it now or will you wait until it is more convenient for me to part with it? "

"I'll wait, Mac ; but hadn't we better get back to camp as soon as possible? It must be nearly daylight now."

"Well, stop argufying and let us get our work done. Make a sack o' your coat and carry as much dirt over to the water as you can." Macalister caused his torch to blaze again and led the way across to the dark, sullen pool into which the cascade leaped from an unseen point above. He was in a hurry now, and had no time to waste words. Standing in the water on a ledge which ran round the edge at a depth of a couple of feet, he began to "wash" the contents of the pan, and Dandy sat down near, torch in hand, watching him interestedly. Macalister was probably the most expert "panner out" in New Guinea, and by means of a few deft half-circular jerks he soon caused the water to carry the bulk of the dirt over the rim of the pan, and now only the heavier particles were left. Again the Scot silently went

through the reducing process until only a mere handful of some material resembling sand lay in the dish. "Look, Dandy!" he suddenly said then, imparting a peculiar concentric motion to the vessel in his hands. Dandy did look and the sight almost made him cry out; the last jerk had thrown over the bulk of the remaining sand, and where it had lain a gleaming "tail" of gold now lay. And there was no doubt about it. Dandy jumped to his feet as his comrade stepped out of the water, and seized the pan.

"There's half an ounce of gold there, Mac," he cried excitedly, yet surprised that his voice sounded so distinctly above the roar of the water.

"No," grinned Macalister, "but there's vera nearly half a pennyweight, and that means that Dandy's Bonanza is the richest known formation in New Guinea, for it goes nearly ten ounces to the ton. Lift out that gold with your knife and throw in some more stuff. We'll be plutocrats before breakfast-time."

Dandy removed the wet gold and refilled the pan, and his comrade soon washed out the contents and showed another trail of the precious yellow metal in the "riffle" of the pan. This was removed, and the pan again filled, and while Macalister effected the separation Dandy ran over to the rock face and brought back another load of dirt in his improvised sack. In a wonderfully short space of time the excavated material was

treated, and as the result a little heap of gold reposed in an old envelope Dandy found in his pocket.

"We have over an ounce there," Macalister announced, drying his limbs with Dandy's discarded garment, "so we haven't done so very badly, and anyhow we have proved the stuff goes ten ounces to the ton, for there was, as near as I can estimate, two hundredweight o' stuff treated."

"Then we have actually earned an ounce of gold or four sovereigns by our own exertions in about two hours," cried Dandy. "We'll not be able to carry away all our gold a month after the boys join us."

"Less than a month will do, Dandy," said Macalister. "We'll build a washing-machine with split bamboos and make this great sheet o' falling water do the work o' more than a score o' us. All hands will be employed digging out the conglomeration, and we'll wash each day's work in an hour by means of an inclined bamboo washing-frame and the help o' the water. I'm a wee bit surprised, though, that we've grown so used to the roar of the fall that we don't even hear it now. I suppose, though, a fellow would get used to doing without a head in time if he could only acquire the habit."

"I believe you're right, Mac," Dandy laughed, "but to live long enough to acquire the headless habit would be a bit difficult, don't you think?"

"I think it is high time we were out in the

fresh air. It must be daylight now, and I'm as hungry as ever Beefsteak was." The Scot walked towards the ledge that led upwards to the exit into the crater, and causing his torch to flare out for the last time, Dandy followed. They managed the ascent much more easily than they had expected until the last ledge was reached. Here they almost stuck, but finally Macalister hoisted Dandy on his shoulders, whence he easily gained the top, and next moment Dandy was lying over, his feet caught in a cleft, giving his comrade all the assistance he required to enable him to scramble up. "We'll fix a rope ladder there," the latter observed, turning to examine the place before proceeding to the outside world. "You see, Dandy, it is a good bit easier going down than coming up. The copy-books at school used to say that in a vera nice sentence, but I forget the words. Leave your torch on the ledge and we'll go out and say good-morning to the boys ; I do hope some o' them have made a start to get breakfast ready. Just imagine their faces when we tell our story." While speaking Macalister had passed through the hole which led under the clump of scrub, and his companion was only a few seconds behind him. During all their experiences their rifles had remained slung upon their backs, but now they had to be removed and carried in their hands to allow of an easy passage under the dense nettle creepers. Suddenly they emerged into the crater

hollow. It was broad daylight, but the sun had not yet risen above the great eastern spur which formed the boundary between German and British territory. Not a sound broke the stillness of the strange hollow, even the birds seemed to have become unusually silent. Macalister glanced around. The camp was higher up the slope, but the trees hid it from view.

"The lazy beggars!" he growled. "They would sleep for ever if they got the chance. Come on, Dandy; we've got to make the breakfast ourselves after all. Won't I give Vic Charlie and Big Sam a hot time though! As for Irish Mike and Frenchy, they canna be blamed for they are being led astray by Charlie and Sam, but the Captain ought to have seen to matters better——"

"What about the Professor, Mac?" put in Dandy. "He went out for a walk last night, too, you know."

"I had forgotten him entirely," Macalister replied, "and he's wearing my clothes, too! My memory is becoming vera bad."

They were now proceeding up the hill over the crushed scrub which marked the line of their previous journey downwards. Macalister had suddenly grown silent, and despite Dandy's efforts to draw forth some remarks he remained so until they burst through a patch of "quinine" trees and beheld the camp about twenty yards in front. Then he stopped and clutched Dandy's arm. "Lie

flat," he whispered, "there is something far wrong here !"

Both men dropped to the ground on the instant, but Dandy could not understand what his comrade had seen to make him so cautious in approaching their own camp. He looked inquiringly at Macalister for some explanation, and speedily received an answer as silent as had been his question. Macalister simply pointed to a piece of wood lying near, and the eloquence of its presence was more than equal to half an hour's conversation. It was a warrior's club !

A violent shock permeated Dandy's being, and in a second the full meaning of Macalister's fears burst upon him. The camp had been wiped out during the night by a hostile band of natives ! only Macalister and he had escaped, even as the Professor had done on a previous occasion in the same place. Dumb with horror and amazement, though not yet fully comprehending everything, Dandy followed Macalister's roving eyes, and soon saw more proofs tending to confirm his worst fears. On the right were two pieces of a broken spear, and near by lay a hollow log which a second glance showed to be a tubular war-drum, the ends of which were covered with snake skin. A huge feathery head-dress was hanging from a small palm within a few yards of where he lay, and it needed no brilliant deduction to tell that the man to whom it had belonged did not now

require it. Next moment the fact was placed beyond doubt: he lay coiled up in a heap on the ground, partly hidden by some creepers he had broken down in his fall. He was a powerfully built warrior of a type the lad had never previously seen, but the half-visible markings on his naked body proclaimed him to be one of the fierce, unconquerable, head-hunting Tugenis. He would hunt no more!

Dandy strove to ask Macalister if he thought that all the boys had been killed, but he could not articulate. And now he saw evidence of a great struggle everywhere around. All the scrub had been broken down, and tufts of feathers were scattered about promiscuously—not from living birds, but from the enormous head-dresses of the proud but savage natives. Here and there he could now see various weapons lying where they had fallen from their wielders' hands. Huge two-edged wooden swords, clubs, bone knives, barbed spears, little fantastically carved wooden idols representing crocodiles, snakes, birds, and fishes, and strange-looking contrivances he knew were musical (!) instruments. Some were suspended among the dense creeping vegetation which interlaced the trees, some were broken, and all bore signs of having been used to a considerable extent only recently. No bird moved in the tree-tops, no sound indicative of life broke the awful silence, and only the few odd yards in front the bark covering under

which the prospectors had retired to rest gleamed brightly in the dancing sunlight.

Suddenly Macalister rose to his feet. "Come on, Dandy," he said. "Warden or no Warden, we've got to avenge our comrades, and by all that I hold sacred I swear that I'll have ten lives for every one of our fellows who have gone under." His voice was terribly unemotional, but Dandy knew that the Scot's heart was almost breaking.

Without a word Dandy rose and followed his comrade. He, too, had an account to settle against those who had killed his friends, and if he lived it would be settled in full. Each man saw that his rifle was ready for instant work, and both were all ears and eyes for signs of the presence of any living creature. But they heard nothing, nor did they see anything, and in a few moments they were standing in the camp, now deserted and desolate. The mining tools still lay where they had been deposited, and Fat Head's men's loads were untouched, but the men themselves, both black and white, and all weapons, were missing. No, not all. Macalister bent and picked up a revolver from amongst some stones. He examined it closely and in silence, then lifted Vic Charlie's remnant of a hat and gave it some study. Dandy watched him eagerly, but he felt it mattered little what story of the massacre the big one would build from the relics. His comrades had been attacked during the night, and he had not been with them to share

their fate. Macalister kicked away the ashes of the still burning fire and revealed a nicely browned damper just ready ; then he dropped on his knees and scrutinised the ground leading up towards the summit ridge of the crater. The fight, apparently, had raged as furiously on that side of the camp as on the lower slope, for the ground bore evidences of the conflict that could not be mistaken.

Suddenly Macalister spoke. "Dandy," he said, "you're surely forgetting your duty this morning. I'm vera hungry, and we've a lot to do." He lifted the damper from the ashes and placed a billy of water which stood near, already filled, upon the fire to boil. Dandy started at the callous-like words. He could not believe he heard aright. But Macalister went on in the same strain, and the lad concluded that he had become mad. His own position was now surely unenviable. Alone in the heart of the most inaccessible part of cannibalistic New Guinea with a madman ! All his comrades killed by savage, unreasoning natives who, perhaps, even at the moment were watching him. But Macalister still lived, and his duty was to look after him.

"All right, Mac," he temporised. "Just sit down in the shade and I'll have some breakfast ready in no time. Would you like coffee or tea ? And do you think you would relish some slices of that turkey we dined on last night, if I fried them ? "

Macalister looked at Dandy curiously, and laughed. "We haven't time for fancy dishes," he said. "We'll only wait for some tea with cold turkey and damper. We have a big contract, laddie, but I'll no' insult you by suggesting that you should make tracks down to Esperance Valley camp, and leave things to me."

"I should think not, Mac; but what are we to do? I'm with you to the end, whatever it may be——"

"The end, Dandy, is extremely doubtful. But our work is none the less clear. Let's get breakfast over and start at once. We're no use, you know, unless we are at our best in every way."

"What do you mean, Mac? What are we to do? And how can it matter whether we are at our best or not? Our comrades are dead, and we will not be long in following them over the divide into that land where a claim is eternal and where murdering savages are unknown——"

"And Wardens who encourage them also, I hope," added Macalister; "for if the Resident Magistrates in British New Guinea were of the same mind as those in charge in German and Dutch territory, the Tugeris wouldn't dare carry on as they are doing. They don't like the machine guns of the Germans, and that is why they are always in poor old over-civilised Britain's part of the island. Excuse me speaking strongly, laddie, I canna help it. Black and white can

never meet on equal terms in this life, because the black man thinks any consideration shown him is a sign of weakness, and acts accordingly with his club and spear. If I were Warden in this part o' New Guinea I would follow those raiding Tugeris until they were exterminated, or had given hostages for their future good behaviour. But the water in the billy is boiling—fling in a handful of tea and we'll breakfast——”

“And after that?” asked Dandy, not knowing what to make of Macalister's speech, yet grasping his meaning fully.

“After that the del—deliverance, if we play our game well and successfully, which, I'll admit, is no' just as easy as speaking.”

“What game, Mac? We're almost helpless, as you must know. I am sure, however, I can steer back to Esperance camp easily, for although I did not tell the boys, I know how to use the sextant, and I see the Captain's is lying over by that sugar-sack.”

“Dandy, do you think I'm daft, or have *you* got kinkled in the brain-box with the sun? I hardly understand you. I'll never leave this part o' the world unless in company o' the men with whom I came into it, and I thought you were of a similar mind.”

“But they are dead, Mac——”

“But they're no'——”

“What! Are they still alive? Speak, Mac,

quick ! I'll go to the ends of the earth for them with you——"

"Do you think, Dandy, I would bother about my stomach's requirements unless I thought it was vera necessary in their interests? They are not dead, but they are prisoners in the hands o' an army o' bloodthirsty Tugeris, and we have got to rescue them before the full-moon feast, or take part in that awful ceremony with them."

"Then lead on, Mac. I'm with you, although I can't see how you know they are alive——"

"That's as plain as the fact that Vic Charlie made this damper before the rush took place——"

"He must have, for I didn't prepare it last night."

"Therefore it must have been just before daylight or immediately after that it happened, for Vic Charlie never wakens much before sunrise. Allowing that much, the boys must know we are all right and will come after them, so let's dine and go."

"But, Mac ! you haven't explained anything yet. I can see that it must have been morning when the camp was rushed, but what does the time matter? They may have been killed just the same? "

"No, laddie ; they havena been killed. I thought it was all over at first, but the evidence now proves that it is not yet too late to save them. Oh, pardon me, Dandy. I forgot that you were really a new chum, although you know so much.



"THIS IS THE CAPTAIN'S REVOLVER."

Just tear into that damper, and anything else you can get your hands on, and I'll tell you how I arrive at my conclusion. First, this is the Captain's revolver, and there are three chambers still loaded in it. Now, if the Captain had been struck down so suddenly that he couldn't empty his shooter, although he had started to use it, there would be gory signs right here of the fact, even allowing his body had been carried away. Again, here is Vic Charlie's old hat—he wouldn't leave camp of his own accord without it for fear Frenchy or Irish Mike might appropriate it ; therefore he, being cooking over at the fire there, hadn't time to get it when the circus came along. Big Sam's blanket, too, suggests by its appearance that he was roused hurriedly, for see, it is trailed half across the Captain's. He had just time to grip his rifle and get one shot, as you may observe from that ejected cartridge lying there——”

“Then you think that our fellows chased the natives?” cried Dandy, interrupting. “The ground looks like that——”

“They didn't,” said Macalister. “If you look closely you'll see that the trampled scrub course leads through this camp right up over the summit. That is the way the warriors went, but you can safely allow that our boys didna follow them—they went with them as prisoners. The Tugeris do not carry away dead men, and they have implanted in them the idea that they must not touch the belong-

ings of their destined sacrifices, or they would become tapu themselves. It is easily evident, therefore, when we take everything into account, that our boys were rushed this morning while breakfast was being prepared, and were taken completely by surprise. Of course, they fought like honest prospectors, all the same, as the ground around shows, but they got little chance, and they were carried bodily away over the ridge to form the next sacrifices. In fact, Dandy, I am convinced now that the noises we at first heard away down in the cave were the discordant shouts of warriors as they nerved themselves for the attack, and not the roar of the waterfall at all. I canna understand exactly how Vic Charlie was baking a damper so unconcernedly, though, when it was your job to do that. How did the boys no' come out to look for us? "

"The Captain knew we were out of camp. He saw the Professor and you go, and then he stopped me——"

"Ah ! then they will know that we are on their trail. Come on, Dandy. We'll better get away at once——"

"Hullo ! " cried Dandy. "Here is the Professor. He has been up a tree ! "

"My trousers are safe, then, at any rate," Macalister muttered. "What's the matter with you, Professor? "

"I saw the whole affair ! " gasped the being

descending from a tree near. "This is the second time——"

"I wish you had come down half an hour ago, then," growled Macalister. "You might have saved me a lot o' talk explaining things I didna see. However, I observe you have a bird in your hand a wee bit different from any I've noticed before."

"It is the Bower bird Brown," the Professor answered, handing his treasure to Macalister. "I nearly lost it in my fright. Be careful, it is alive!"

"So I see," grunted the Scot, throwing it into the air, "and it has a good chance o' living longer than you, Professor, for I fancy you've got to resume your role o' mamoose, but it will be among the Tugeris, and I vera much fear you'll no' have your magic umbrella."

CHAPTER X

THE SACRED CROCODILES

MACALISTER had reasoned correctly almost to every detail. His comrades had been rushed that morning by an overwhelming army of Tugeris who had suddenly appeared near the bottom of the hollow. They were taken entirely unprepared, and although they did wonders in trying to retrieve their position, they had no chance against such numbers as assailed them in what was instantly a hand-to-hand conflict. The Tugeris knew better than to allow the white men the opportunity of using their fire magic, and they were well acquainted with every art in warfare in which the personal element alone came into play. The prospectors were borne down in a few seconds by sheer weight of numbers, and while still clutching their weapons, were hitched together by the feet and half carried along by the natives, who, indeed, had hardly even halted at the camp. Over the ridge they were dragged, the warriors chanting loudly their song of praise. They had taken the rifles from their prisoners, of course, not as legitimate plunder, but so as to render their owners harmless. They knew nothing of Fat Head

and his men, for at the first sign of trouble the carriers had cleared out, with most surprising swiftness, considering their usual tired method of progression.

The white men simply could not help themselves at first, because they knew that if they resisted in any way ropes would be passed round their necks as well as round their feet. So, muttering many words in terse, emphatic, and characteristic language, entirely meaningless to their captors, they submitted, for the time, to the urgency of their position.

Down the outer hill-slope they were led, but on the side leading still farther into the fastnesses of the unknown country. The natives were very well pleased with themselves, and while the common warriors sang their triumphant war songs, those who appeared to be the leaders jabbered excitedly to each other, deciding, as some of the prisoners knew, the particular form of sacrifice most pleasing to their ghost-ancestors, in which the captives would play the chief parts.

"It's all very well to say go along quietly," spoke Big Sam, as he stumbled over a stone and nearly brought all his comrades down on top of him, "but I don't hanker much after being made into any blamed sacrifice. I'd rather peg out Christian-like, and I'm sure I could do some damage before giving up the ghost."

"I say the same," said Irish Mike. "Shure,

there ain't no fun in this game for anybody but the niggers, and I've got my revolver in my shirt ready to blow the heads off some of them——"

"I vith you agree," said Frenchy. "I too haf my shooter free, and I too do not like being cooked——"

"I believe I can slip my foot free," said Vic Charlie, "and if I could get at the Captain's knife in time to cut you all out, we might show these frizzy-haired beggars that we're better than a dozen dead men yet."

"Then wait a bit, boys," advised the Captain. "What we can do now we can do later, possibly with more chances of success. We have no earthly hope of getting away as things are, and while we could certainly kill off some of our friends, that is but poor satisfaction. After a bit they will not watch us so closely, and then, if we play 'possum now, we may surprise them to some extent. Besides, boys, Macalister and Dandy are free, and I think we all know that Mac is as good as an army."

"Blow me, boys!" exclaimed Big Sam. "I had forgotten Mac. He'll be on our trail now, I'll bet my whiskers, and he never makes mistakes."

"Begorrah, boys!" Mike put in. "Do yez remember how he got us out of that trouble we ran into with the Germans last year? They said we were on their side of the boundary, and were filibusters, and would be shot shure, until Mac

blarneyed their Captain into believing we were only silly butterfly-hunters and didn't know which end of a gun was the business end."

"Old Mac is a terror right enough when he goes out on the war-path," agreed Vic Charlie. "I have known him for a good long time now, and I can call to mind dozens of cases which looked as bad as ours at present, and every time Mac sailed along and pulled us through. Sometimes it was in the South Seas, where we were after pearls where we shouldn't have been, and sometimes it was in other places, where trouble rises round a fellow like a cloud of mosquitoes ; but old Mac was on hand every time, or you can go nap that I shouldn't be here in this little picnic now."

"I know Macalister will make every endeavour to pull us out of this fix," the Captain said, "and with Dandy and the Professor he may do wonders if we can keep our captors from thinking they haven't got us all. I suppose Mac will quickly tumble to what has happened and arrange some plan or other. Probably he will send Dandy and the Professor down the river to look for some of the other fellows who may be coming to the reported gold discovery——"

"The Professor ees not to us any good," interpolated Frenchy. "He ees too much a bird man. He vill vly out of ze countairy an' not stop anywhere until the sea he reach, or some natives catch him."

"I believe you're right," said Big Sam, "but Dandy is all right. He is of the right stuff through and through, and I'm ready to stake my next smoke that he'll be a blamed good second to Macalister."

"It's all the Warden's fault," put in Irish Mike. "If the idiots put in charge in this scorching country had had any sense they would have made it clear by this time that the natives cyan't treat the white men as they loike any more than the white fellows cyan do them. We're martyrs, bhoys, and we'll have crocodiles for tombstones unless Macalister shows up pretty quickly."

"Well, we can't help ourselves much at present," rejoined the Captain. "At the first sign of fight we would be clubbed on the head, and carried along afterwards ; as things are, we have always the chance of a fight when we are driven to it, and possibly our powers in that direction may mean more than our friends the Tugeris at present imagine. In any case, boys, I should like to know where the Tugeris live when at home, and I feel certain that we are doing no harm in accompanying them thither, seeing that otherwise white people would never know. Mac will be after us closely, you may be sure, and although we may be destined for sacrifices by the natives, we may yet disappoint them."

It was indeed wonderful the faith all had in Macalister, considering how they usually treated him when in camp !

The Tugeris sped onwards as if they had an important engagement to fulfil at a certain time, and their prisoners found it much more convenient to keep pace with them of their own accord, for when Frenchy tried the expedient of lying down upon the ground, the warriors simply hauled him along like a log of wood, and he soon thought it advisable to regain his feet.

"You see, Frenchy," the Captain explained, "our friends don't care much whether you arrive at their altars damaged or not, so long as you are still alive. I know a little about their ways, and I think you should preserve yourself as well as you can until some developments take place. We can't possibly attempt to hold an argument."

The Captain's words were admitted by all to be words of wisdom, for certainly they could not better their position by causing trouble: a blow on the head with a spiked club would soon end that matter and the trouble-raisers at the same time. Thus, grumbling, discussing things, and heaping blessings on the Warden's head, they lumbered along. They were particularly bitter against the Warden, reasoning that if he had taken half as much trouble to make the natives respect the law as he was doing with the white men, the Tugeris would not have dared to molest prospectors. Occasionally the Captain put in a word, asking for fair play for the much-abused Resident Magistrate appointed by the Federal Government of Australia.

"You must remember, boys," he said after Big Sam and Irish Mike had concluded a discussion as to the Warden's fate should they ever have the luck to meet him, "it is really our own fault that we are in trouble ; the Warden barred this country, and we came into it at our own risk."

"Yes, and he sent niggers after us," retorted Vic Charlie, "and likely enough those beggars around us now think they are doing a real good thing by chopping off our heads to slow music ; they are bound to know all the news, for old Beefsteak or some other hungry cannibal could send it all over Papua by that confounded wireless telegraphy of theirs which white men don't understand."

"Oh yes, Charlie, white men know all about it, and there is really no mystery in the matter. A native shouts the news from a hilltop, and those stationed on the neighbouring peaks repeat it on right across the country, also passing the information down to their own people in the village far beneath. Men are trained from infancy for the work, and every tribe maintains its own signalling, or rather shouting, station."

"Snakes, boys !" cried Big Sam. "How did the Captain come to know so much about the natives and their ways? I'll bet he must have been a missionary before he joined our party——"

"No, I wasn't a missionary, but I had travelled fairly extensively throughout New Guinea before I threw in my lot with you fellows."

"I'll bet a kick at the warrior nearest me you were once a blamed Warden," suggested Vic Charlie, "and that is why you are always on his side."

"You cannot kick with your feet shackled as they are, Charlie," the Captain laughed, "so your bet is useless ; guess again, though."

"An' shure when you are at it, guess how we are going to get out of this," said Irish Mike. "My ankle is moighty sore with dragging Frenchy along. I wish Macalister would hurry up with his rescuing party."

"You fellows can talky as plenty as you like," observed Frenchy. "I am too hot, and eet ees to sleep I am going."

"Begorrah, an' it is not, you lazy loafer !" cried Mike. "You're bad enough to have to haul along by the feet as it is, but if ye were schlapping I'd have to carry ye."

"When is feeding time in this little pilgrim band?" Vic Charlie asked irrelevantly. "I'm as hungry as a crocodile."

"I hope old Mac will roll up before tucker-time comes along," said Big Sam. "We're the tucker, you know, Charlie, and the niggers are keeping us alive so as to be fresh."

"I don't see the joke," the Captain put in as all the men laughed. "We are certainly intended for sacrifice, or we should have been killed."

"*That's* the joke, Cap," cried Mike. "Don't

ye see they'll not get a decent meal out of the lot of us, an' they'll never know that Vic Charlie never agrees with any man until they have dined on him——"

"You are a set of children," the Captain interrupted. "You don't seem to realise that we are in a very serious position."

No answer was made by any of the men, a clear sign that all were becoming tired and listless. Despite their assumed gaiety they knew that things looked bad for them; and they were hungry and thirsty. They became silent, and struggled on as best they could, each taking care that he did not hurt his comrade unduly by taking a step out of time. The sun streamed down upon them, and they could hardly breathe, in their efforts to keep pace with their captors and thus be hauled after them. The natives evidently were in a great hurry, for they never halted even for a drink of water when crossing a stream, although the prisoners simply disregarded consequences at such times and threw themselves down in the water to cool their parched throats. All through the scorching day they were rushed along around the base of a mighty peak which towered high into the sky. The Captain kept a rough bearing by observing the sun, at first, but soon he became hopelessly mixed as it seemed to swing from left to right and back again with amazing rapidity. In the afternoon the natives began to climb the slopes, and just before

sundown a large village burst into view, nestling on a stream which seemed to cut its way through the great mountain. The houses were built on piles over the water, but were different in several ways from those of the villages of lower altitudes. There seemed to be about three hundred dwellings in the place, including the tree-houses and the piled edifice overhanging the water. Thus, the population, according to the usual method of calculation in New Guinea, totalled nearly two thousand—an extremely exceptional number for any village away from the coast—and, allowing two fighting men for every house, the warriors amounted to six hundred. Most probably other villages belonging to the same people were near, and therefore the dreaded Tugeris were strong enough in their mountain homes to resist any invasion by the handful of white men who pursued the elusive yellow metal down on the alluvial flats.

The inhabitants turned out in full strength to greet the victorious band of warriors, and great was their delight on beholding the white prisoners. What the old men of the village said none of the white men knew, nor did they care much; but although they were almost completely exhausted, Big Sam had still fight enough left in him to object to the attentions of some of the female part of the populace. They swarmed round the prisoners with exclamations, probably expressive of pleasure or curiosity, and the tired men felt very humble

indeed. In a few seconds the gentle sex had done what the lordly Tugeris scorned to do : they went through the pockets of the helpless white men and removed everything therein contained. This was what had caused Big Sam to remonstrate, and he did so in language the reverse of gallant.

“I wouldn’t have minded your evil-smelling, dirty old faces,” he concluded after having expressed his feelings as aforesaid, “but when you take away and eat, before my eyes, my last bit of tobacco I reckon that even old Macalister would howl out. Get out, you cross-eyed lump of coal ! I’ll tell your mother about you : you might leave me my shirt-buttons anyhow.”

“Go away ! Go away !” shrieked Frenchy at that point, roused to desperation as a dusky damsel threw her arms around his neck. “I do not your dirty face like. Go away, or I’ll—I’ll call ze poleece——”

Luckily some of the chief warriors interfered just then and drove the ladies away, and a deputation of old men took the prisoners in charge and led them to a long, low erection, the roof of which was surmounted by an enormous, carved wooden monstrosity in the shape of a crocodile with white stripes of paint freely lavished all over its ungainly body. This clearly was a sort of prison, and the prospectors speedily realised that although its walls were fragile it served its purpose very well. It stood upon piles driven into the water and was

approached by a quaint bamboo bridge which reached out from the bank of the sluggish river backwater. But the water was packed with crocodiles, some inside the piles and some outside. They were starving, it seemed, and it also looked as though they were now anticipating a square meal, for they scurried about in the mud with an energy that promised short life to the man who fell among them.

Big Sam laughed when he saw the prison-house. "We'll soon get out of here," he whispered to the Captain. "If we could only get something to eat now I'd feel happy——" He paused abruptly, and then uttered an exclamation, terse and full of deep meaning. The guards were removing the bridge! They were now in a structure separated from the land, and surrounded by hundreds of famishing saurians, whose actions clearly showed that they looked upon feeding-time as a ceremony which would not long be delayed. The men looked at each other in mute comprehension, and then Big Sam laughed. "Well, I'll be jiggered!" he said. "But that is as cute a dodge as I have ever seen. The Tugeris are not fools, and the man who allows they are will fall into a hole he'll not get out of easily. We've put off our little circus too long, Captain, and I reckon we're as good as gone coons now."

"That may be," Irish Mike commented, "but we're not dead yet, an' we're not going to peg out

if we cyan help it. Begorrah ! I'm more than starving now, though ; cyan't some one think out a plan for getting something to eat? "

" Yes, I can," said the Captain, " but we'll have to wait until it is as dark as can be, and we are sure that the warriors have been fed to their satisfaction. I smell cooking operations now, and I think we have a fair chance of sampling what is being cooked."

" Explain your idea, then, Cap," implored Big Sam. " I don't care when the beggars eat me, but I want something to eat myself first."

" I suppose you can all slip your shackled foot free? " the Captain continued, and on receiving an answer from all in the affirmative, went on with his scheme : " All of you will free yourselves, taking care to leave the loops round your ankles, so that you can slip into them again when need be. You will all climb through the floor of this place and slide down the most convenient supporting piles until just above the water——"

" Howling smoke ! " ejaculated Vic Charlie, " You're making a mistake, Cap ; it's we poor beggars who want a feed, and we're nor caring much though the old crocs down below never get one."

" Well, you needn't allow them to get you. Just hang on to the piles above their reach and attract them all you can by imitating the sobbing of a

child, or by any other device you like. When you have gathered all the saurians around you in anticipation of a meal, I'll slip quietly into the water at the far end of the house and swim for the shore. Once there, I have no doubt I'll be able to collect enough food for us all, and you fellows can meanwhile take a rest until you hear my signal. Then you'll act as bait again and I'll come out in any canoe I can find, and we'll dine."

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Big Sam, "only I'll do the shore trick, Cap. We can't afford to lose you."

"Begorrah! I'll do it," cried Irish Mike. "Shure, didn't Macalister say I had the most tact among the crowd?"

"It's a matter of tucker, and as I was the camp cook until Dandy took on the job, I'll see to it myself," said Vic Charlie.

"No, no," reasoned Frenchy. "I am ze one who not needed ees so much as ze oders. I'll go on shore."

"Gentlemen, unless you have deposed me from my position, my words are final; I am the food-getter," said the Captain quickly. "We have no time for heroics now; climb down the poles and leave the rest to me. If I am not back in half an hour, count me as having pegged out, and act as you think best yourselves."

"We'll peg out ourselves, Captain." Big Sam spoke, and his voice was strangely different from that of Big Sam the reckless prospector.

Not another word was said, and as darkness had now fallen over the land, the scheme was at once put into operation. The men slipped their feet free of the fibre ropes, and pulling up some of the floor's rough timbers, climbed down over the stagnant water. They didn't require to make any attempt of imitating a sobbing child, for the starving creatures were fighting around them in an instant, leaping half way up the piles in their savage eagerness for food. They were the sacred crocodiles, and never having been molested by man, had absolutely no fear of him. But being sacred, they suffered some disadvantages, in accordance with the immutable law of compensation. One serious set-off was the fact that they were never fed unless some prisoners were brought in by the warriors, and they had long ago lost all desire for any other forms of food, or they might have betaken themselves elsewhere, if the water allowed of emigration, which, however, possibly it did not, as it looked more like a small lake than anything else. But the huge, ungainly "armour-plated" denizens of the lake or river were not endowed with much reasoning powers; a long time, comparatively, had elapsed since their last gorge, and even "tapu" or sacred crocodiles can't live for ever on an occasional Tugeri caught by a sudden rush while worshipping at the tombs of his ancestors (the crocodiles are invariably the tombs). Like them, the white prospectors didn't believe in being

hungry if they could obtain food, but they had no sentimental inclination to being the food for the saurians themselves. Indeed, they had a decided objection to satisfying the poor starving creatures' appetites by dropping into their enormous mouths. So they clung tightly to the piles and kicked out at the most venturesome crocs. who leaped at their extremities, and down in the evil-smelling waters now churned into mud by the many swishing tails and already tinged red—although the living bait on the house supports couldn't see it—with the blood of some of the weaker wielders of those tails, a fierce battle for the best position for first bite raged fiercely. While it proceeded the Captain slid gently into the water and without let or hindrance swam to the bank. He whistled a signal when he landed, and when Big Sam answered the men climbed back up the piles into their prison and slipped the binding loops over their feet so as to be prepared against the visit of any deputation of natives. The Captain had Big Sam's revolver with him, but absolutely nothing else. He had kept the weapon dry, of course, and after shaking himself and wringing the water from his clothes, for the air was slightly chilly in the Tugeri village, and therefore not conducive to comfort in wet garments, he started for the part of the settlement he thought might afford him his requirements. The Captain was no novice in the work he had undertaken, and keeping in

the shadows where possible, and running swiftly past where not, he soon gained the fringe of a great firelit circle in which sat all the warriors who had just returned, and many others, doubtless prominent natives. They were being entertained, and on a scale as lavish, according to Papuan customs, as that of a banquet to any foreign celebrity in Britain. One long fire, carefully watched and kept in perfect order by a number of attendants not yet fully fledged warriors, formed the centre of the banqueting-ground, and in its red embers and hot ashes lay all the spoils of river and forest which had been brought in that day. The people were proud of the warrior band that had vanquished the much-vaunted white men, and were now doing its members full honour. Strangely enough, perhaps, man found no place in the menu of this great cannibal feast. Man was reserved for sacrifices to their gods. The Captain seemed to know that although the choice viands, feathered and furry, were taken from the hot ashes of the great circle fire, they were really cooked elsewhere, and skulking past in the shadows, he dodged some groups of spectators and made for a cleared space in the middle of the village now almost deserted. There, he knew, the items of the feast were prepared by the most skilled cooks of which the tribe could boast, and thence removed to the ceremonial fire round which the heroes sat. The populace were already gathered around the



THE CAPTAIN CAUGHT HIM BY THE FEET AND THREW HIM
HEAVILY TO THE GROUND.

men who had brought white captives home to their village, almost every house being vacated except for the very youngest of male and female Tugeris. The Captain lay flat upon the ground behind a cocoanut-palm and watched his chance. Natives passed and repassed within a few feet of his prostrate body, but apparently they never suspected his presence, and perhaps it was just as well for themselves, for the Captain was now a desperate man.

At length only three cooks were left in attendance, and in the belief that the number would not likely become less, the Captain resolved to act. He did. He crawled forward over the trampled ground, keeping well in the shadows, and soon reached the fringe of the cooking fires' light, just behind a stalwart native who was superintending the roasting of some fowls. He didn't superintend long, for the Captain caught him by the feet and threw him heavily to the ground, then, before his surprise had allowed him to utter a sound, the Captain pushed a handful of leaves into his mouth, and he was gagged as effectively as any man could be. Needless to say, he was then pulled away from the fire and hitched to a palm-tree by means of a stout fibrous tendril the Captain cut from among some creeping growths near. While the remaining assistants were still attending to their duties, he crept back and tackled one who was nearest a clump of scrub of some kind. This

man, however, struggled violently after being thrown, and the Captain had to compress his throat before he yielded. The end was the same—he was tied up alongside his comrade, but it was not necessary to gag him ; it would be some time before he could cry out, and even then there were no evidences to show that a white prisoner had done the trick.

The gallant Captain was saved the trouble of disposing of the third cook. Just as he was about to spring upon him some attendants arrived from the entertaining fire for more pigs, fowls, and fish, to place in the ashes. Evidently the warriors were doing full justice to the feast provided. The Captain felt alarmed at first ; he thought that nothing would be left behind for him. But he saw his chance, nevertheless, and took it. While the waiters and the cook transacted their business at one end of the long fire, he seized a spear which had been the property of one of his victims, and probed in the ashes for what he could find. He remained in the shadows, of course, and as the fire was about a hundred feet in length, the men at the other end did not see him. He quickly hooked several fowls of a variety he did not know. They had been roasted whole in the ashes, and the feathers came off at once in his hands. He plied his spear again and again, and only seldom drew a blank, and soon his accumulation of food materials was as much as he could carry. Then

he wriggled back from the danger zone and into the shadows of the houses. The place was still deserted, and although he felt strongly tempted to enter one of the peculiar thatched dwellings, and see if he couldn't add to his stores, his reason told him that such a proceeding would be fool-hardy, and he refrained. Skirting the village, he in time struck the water again at a point above the tapu-house, where his comrades were confined. As if placed there for his convenience, he found several canoes drawn up on the bank almost at his feet. He threw his provisions into one and pushed it into the water, jumping in just as its movement back towards the village showed there was a current in the water. Soon the tapu-house loomed up ahead, and he steered into it with a single paddle he had found in the craft. The natives round the festive fire were now singing to the accompaniment of many drums, and doubtless stories of their individual deeds of daring while fighting the white men would follow.

So far, therefore, all was well, and the Captain whistled the signal of his approach. Instantly it was answered, and Big Sam climbed out on the roof to see from which direction the Captain was coming. The moon shone out brilliantly, and objects could be very plainly discerned, but even in complete darkness one would have known of the presence of the crocodiles by reason of their smell, their strange, bark-like cries, and the sound of their

swishing tails as they lashed the water into vile-smelling, muddy foam.

Again the men climbed down and acted as bait, and running the canoe gently alongside the piles at the opposite end of the erection, the Captain flung his pigs, fish, and fowls up upon the bark balcony which reached out over the water just there. Next minute he kicked the canoe away and clambered up the piles to the same platform, and soon the men joined him from the other end of the place.

“Begorrah! we’ll have the feed of our lives,” commented Irish Mike, as he saw the Captain’s spoils.

“And I don’t care although they come and eat us afterwards,” said Big Sam. “Captain, you’ve done this job as good as Macalister could do, and that is saying a mighty lot.”

“Very well, boys,” the Captain laughed. “Here is food anyhow. Therefore let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we—we’ll go fishing for crocodiles again.”

They did eat and drink, but they weren’t very merry. The drink—the water beneath them—was too highly flavoured for that.

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE BATTLE

AFTER dining the prospectors lay back on the vermin-infested floor and slept. It mattered little to them that a great entertainment was going on in the village, and the monotonous drum-beats and shrill voices of the singers were unheeded. They knew that the present performance was only a sort of prelude, and that they would be called upon to provide the main part of the programme later. They had already considered the possibilities of escape by means of canoes, which one of them might obtain as the Captain had done, but the futility of the scheme was quite apparent to all. Although the Captain had brought a canoe to the tapu-house safely, that was only because his comrades had acted as decoys. No canoe could exist more than a few seconds in the crocodile-infested waters if it were laden with human freight, and that freight entirely helpless except for one revolver, and perhaps a paddle or two. Besides, there was a stockade round the village, and doubtless the lake or river was included within its walls, and what chance had five unarmed men, tired

and weary, of escaping over an obstacle designed to defy the attempts of fierce and fearless savage enemies to gain access to the village? Also there would be hundreds of warriors at their heels the moment their escape was discovered, and doubtless hundreds more would be called from the nearest villages, if not already participating in the feast, to assist in running down the helpless white men. Clearly they had no chance, and as Big Sam said, even if they did escape, Macalister and Dandy would, in their attempt to rescue them, walk into the trap from which they had cleared themselves.

Thus, deciding that whatever happened they would be better able to meet it if at their best physically, the men dined well and then slept, and outside, on the shore, the Tugeris, male and female, feasted, sang, and danced all night. At daylight the prospectors awoke, but the village was now silent, even the fêted warriors having been overcome by Nature. The prospectors would have liked a bath, but they knew that such a proceeding would be most unwise. In the first place, it would inform any chance native taking his morning constitutional walk that the white prisoners were free, and in the second place, the sacred crocodiles would make a meal of them in a few seconds. They didn't take a bath, therefore, but they devoured the remnants of their supper and felt wonderfully well fortified. With the sun, too, their

good spirits returned, and Irish Mike and Frenchy each reckoned they were good for at least a hundred niggers without any weapons. Big Sam thought he could account for ten per cent. more than Mike, and trouble seemed near because of his opinion until the Captain intervened and told all that they should most likely get a chance to show their prowess before the sun had set. They sat still and talked after breakfast, wondering when they would be visited by the natives, and speculating vaguely as to what fate would be destined for them. They were fully determined to have a fight at the last, but they did not wish to display their powers prematurely. Underneath the crocodiles were frantic. They knew their prey was above, and perhaps they wondered why it was so long denied them. Certainly any society existing with the object of preventing cruelty to animals would have had a strong case against the Tugeris, but it is highly probable that the Tugeris would remedy the evil complained of very soon after the society's representatives called upon them, and not in a way very pleasing to the said representatives. But as no such society looked after the interests of New Guinean animal life, the poor sacred crocodiles fasted. Meanwhile the white men rested, recuperating their strength and wondering when Macalister would come.

Late in the forenoon the village suddenly burst into activity, and warriors, old men, women, and

boys were seen rushing about everywhere. The tapu-house, although in the middle of the water, commanded a view of almost every house in the place, and the prisoners had already discovered that fact. Soon a war-drum sounded out some call, and in response the people gathered in the square where the Captain had employed himself so successfully the previous evening. The white men pulled out pieces of the thatched roof which covered them and watched.

Some grotesquely garbed beings mounted an improvised platform and began haranguing the people assembled around them. No doubt they spoke eloquently and to the point, for the populace applauded continuously. The white men didn't appreciate the speeches, however, for several reasons: one being that at least half a dozen men were speaking to the crowd at one and the same time; a second, because they were greatly interested in the dresses worn by the speakers, which apparently were the skins of animals and birds, some of which the prospectors had never seen before; a third, because they didn't understand a word that was said, although they heard the resulting discordant noise quite well.

"That fellow in the crocodile's skin is mighty powerful in the wind-bag," said Big Sam, as one man encased in an enormous crocodile hide addressed the people. "I hope he isn't swearing."

"That other fellow in the wooden mask can

beat him at speechifying, though," commented Vic Charlie, indicating a person fancifully supposed to resemble the chief devil of the Tugeris as far as his garb was concerned.

"Look at that beggar in the shape of a wild pig as big as a horse," cried Irish Mike. "Shure an' no man ever saw a thing like him before. Begorrah, he's got horns, too!"

"I'd like to get his wardrobe," murmured the Captain. "I think he is clothed in the hide of one of the strange creatures said to roam the unknown Dutch territory. Possibly the Professor could tell us all about it, but so far as I know only the natives of these parts have ever seen the animal——"

"Zey was coming," interrupted Frenchy. "He has been tried and now zey is coming to kill us."

The whole population had suddenly begun to move towards the tapu-house, evidently in response to the exhortations of the chiefs or wizards.

"Let them come, then," Big Sam growled. "There will be a decrease in the population of these parts soon after, I reckon, and you can bet the wizard priests will suffer most."

"Don't be reckless, boys," the Captain advised. "We'll hear what they have to say, and then act. Meanwhile, let us all get back into our bonds. Don't look so well fed, Frenchy, and clear away those feathers and bones lying over there."

"Yes," Irish Mike grinned. "Make our little

home look pretty. Shure an' it isn't every day we have visitors. Smarten yourself up, Vic Charlie, and lend me your knife if ye don't feel like using it yourself."

Vic Charlie reckoned he could carve a Tugeri with his knife as well as Mike, but there was no time for argument on that point as the people were now swinging the bridge out from the shore. It was a cleverly constructed piece of work and greatly resembled in appearance the overhead cranes used in building ships in civilised countries. Bamboo rods, however, took the place of steel girders, and fibrous ropes the bolts and rivets. It was very high, its moving part being ingeniously pivoted between the tops of a group of tall palms which grew on shore, and which allowed the bridge to incline itself to the ground when not in use, spanning the water between the village and the roof of the tapu-house. An intricate system of ropes controlled its movements, and an army of natives supplied the power.

The prisoners hurriedly placed their feet in the loops of the long fibre rope which was supposed to hold them secure, and lay down on the floor and tried to look hungry. They could still see the proceedings on shore through the spaces between the uprights forming the walls of their abode.

All the fantastically garbed beings stepped on to the lower end of the bridge as it rested on the ground, and then about a hundred powerful natives

pulled at the ropes and raised it until the swinging arm was level with the roof of the tapu-house. The priests thus raised aloft uttered no sound, but in spite of their dignity they had to clutch at the latticed sides until the bridge assumed a horizontal position. Then it was swung out over the water, and its end eventually came into contact with and fitted into a platform on the roof of the tapu-house. The priests descended with slow and grave steps into the room where the prisoners lay and the bridge was swung back for more passengers. But if they thought their appearances were dignified, the men they doubtless meant to impress were not of the same opinion, and it required all their efforts of will-power to restrain themselves from laughing. A crocodile with a tail which couldn't clear itself of the ladder-way, and walking upright, was not, according to their views, a sight to inspire respect. Nor were the other objects which silently—except for accidents to their encasements—filled the place. Big Sam wriggled round and said to Frenchy, "Old man, kick me or I'll burst. Look at that animal-man with a tail at both ends——"

"He ees an elephant," Frenchy replied, "and zat ees his trunk at his before—I mean front——"

"Shut up, boys!" admonished the Captain. "These people are representing creatures that exist in this country somewhere, although we have never seen them."

Big Sam screwed out a groan which seemed to interest the strangely dressed priests. They came forward at once, and the crocodile, addressing the prisoners, began an impassioned oration which Irish Mike said reminded him of the sounds ducks made in Ireland, and which had about the same meaning to him. After the saurian-man had finished the other in turn spoke eloquently, evidently telling the poor prisoners about the enormity of their crimes, and what fate would befall them. By the time all had finished the tapu-house was packed with natives of all ranks and degrees, who had come over on the second and third journey of the bridge, and Big Sam realised that any chance of escape by means of a fight was utterly hopeless.

Then to the surprise of all his comrades the Captain struggled to his feet, dragging his nearest comrades on the rope with him. Next moment they fell again in sheer surprise. The Captain was answering the Tugeri priests in their own language. Luckily the loops in which his feet were fastened allowed a great amount of play, and therefore the collapse of his comrades left him still standing. The Tugeri, too, were surprised, and they made no attempt to hide their feelings. But they listened with fair attention to the Captain's words, and evidently were somewhat impressed by them, for when he had concluded one of them spoke until knocked down by the crocodile-man, who apparently also wished to air his views. He

spoke until the elephant-man pulled him away, and after he had been similarly dealt with another monstrosity voiced his ideas. When all had finished the Captain spoke again, and he certainly spoke as learnedly and as eloquently—so it appeared to his comrades—as any of the others. When he concluded the priests drew apart to converse among themselves, and the surrounding warriors and civilians began to sing what must have been their equivalent of a hymn. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the Captain explained matters to his comrades: “I didn’t know the Tugeri people talked the language I had acquired while—well, some time ago,” he said. “But at any rate I have been able to give them our views of their doings. The funny thing is that they think they are the virtuous people who have been wronged by us; but on that misunderstanding I see a possible way of escape for us, as the priests will, without doubt, order the warriors to leave the place for fear our views may appeal to their sense of honour——”

“Cut all the lecture, Captain,” interrupted Big Sam, “and tell us what was said. We’ll see about escape afterwards.”

“Well,” said the Captain, “the first fellow began by telling us we were prisoners in the hands of the Tugeris because we were white filibusters, and had no right to be in their country, and would, therefore, be given as sacrifices to their gods, they,

of course, allowing that they had no right to eat us themselves, because we had not put up a fight against their warriors sufficient to qualify us for that honour."

"Oh, Lord!" ejaculated Vic Charlie. "They think we are a disgrace to the white people! Let's show them we're not."

"Go slow a bit, Charlie," the Captain said. "I explained that we were not necessarily their enemies, and didn't care a cent for their country, but that Britain, or at least the Commonwealth of Australia, had assumed the Protectorate over New Guinea, and that therefore we, being British subjects, didn't think we were doing any harm in looking for the yellow metal found in this country which white men valued, although they thought sharks' teeth or cowry-shells of much more importance. To this they answered that we had profaned their land by putting foot in it, and my answer that our feet were clean didn't mend matters. They hinted at a scheme which meant the annihilation of the white men in New Guinea, but I didn't quite grasp the details, and now you know all I can tell you. I am of opinion, however, that the notorious Tugeris have been much maligned; they have a sense of honour, or they would have made short work of us before this. Remember they are the one people who have never acknowledged Australian or British rule, and although we may be the victims, there is something to be said on their side."

“That is a mighty long speech, Captain,” said Vic Charlie. “Does it mean that we should ask pardon for being here, and tell them to dine on us as soon as suits their convenience?”

“Hardly, Charlie ; I was trying to show them that we were not necessarily their enemies, and that they had no cause for a quarrel with us. But here comes the crocodile-man again ; I suppose he will settle our fate ; for any sake don’t speak, boys, and leave me to do my best.”

The crocodile-man spoke long and earnestly, and the Captain responded in what must have been a brilliant speech judging by the visible effect it produced upon the natives surrounding. But the crocodile-man was obdurate, and after a brief consultation with his fellow-priests he turned again to the white men and pronounced their sentence, whatever it was, and then the people cheered loudly and began to leave for the shore. The bridge did not now swing to and fro with its passengers ; it was now fixed between the tree-tops and the crocodile-roofed tapu-house, and those crossing had to climb up to it, walk across, and climb down at the other end.

Soon the tapu-house was deserted again, but some of the natives in leaving threw fruit and vegetables to the prisoners, showing that even among the Tugeris were soft-hearted people. The Captain did not speak until all had gone. Then he explained that the time to make their attempt

to escape was at hand, and that if they failed they had a choice of three forms of death before them.

"That's mighty comforting, anyhow," Big Sam observed. "A fellow always likes a choice of anything, and I'm a bit particular on the way I peg out myself."

"Well, the methods are varied enough to suit most tastes," the Captain answered, "although I made a slight mistake when I used the word 'choice.' In reality we haven't got much of a choice, but we have three tests to go through, and if we survive them we'll be set free. Still, I advise our trying to escape before then, for any one of the three will finish our little earthly gold-getting careers. When the moment fixed by the crocodile-man comes we are to be led out on that bridge and thrown down to the sacred crocodiles. If we get clear of them, the fact will be taken as proof that we have not offended the chief god of the people, and the Fire God will get the next chance. I suppose we'll be tied on top of that pile of scrub on shore and burned. If we prove able to stand fire, we will be offered to some other god whose name I did not catch, but whose particular form of sacrifice is wonderfully well adapted for dealing with half-roasted living men who have passed the fires. We will be buried up to our necks in ant-beds, and if we are alive next morning, will be given our liberty, being clearly not specially desired by any of the Tugeri gods."

"It's high time Macalister was here, boys," remarked Vic Charlie. "He'll miss all the fun if he doesn't roll up soon, and I'm sure Dandy would like to get some practical lessons on how to cook men for crocodiles and ants."

"I am afraid even Macalister can't help us much now," the Captain said. "The fact is, comrades, we're done; the Warden was right after all in barring this country to prospectors; probably he knew what would happen."

"I'd die happy if he were only with us now," grunted Big Sam. "It's all his fault if we peg out, because the Tugeris know that we have broken the law in coming here, and that they will not be punished in any way unless a poor missionary comes up to teach them how to be good little children, and gives the fellows who eat him indigestion."

"You all vairy funny," put in Frenchy. "Please tell to me vair ze fun comes in, that I, too, may laugh. I not like being thrown to crocodiles, their teeth so vairy sharp and big. I not like being burned either, eet ees vairy painful; and I do not wish to have bulldog ants crawling into my eyes, nose, mouth, and ears."

"That is the fun, Frenchy," laughed Irish Mike. "It's a new kind of fun that grows in New Guinea, but we'd need the Professor to give it a name. All the same, begorrah! I don't loike it very much myself. I owe Crinkled Peter down in Esperance

Valley camp three plugs of tobacco, and Flash Harry owes me a bottle of fruit-salts. A fellow loikes to square up his affairs before he goes prospecting in the spirit world——”

“But we haven’t started on that journey yet, Mike,” cried Big Sam hopefully, “and we’ll have a good few Tugeri warriors for carrier-boys when we do set out if this village is our last camp here.”

“No, we are not exactly dead men yet,” the Captain said, “and we’ll certainly put up a fight to remain in life. Now, boys, I don’t think anything can be gained by waiting here a moment after we have the chance to leave. My proposal is that when the crowd on shore disperses (for dinner likely) we’ll rush across the bridge so kindly left in position for us, tackle the natives on guard at the other end, and slide down to the ground if we’re not thrown down by them, and simply run for it. We cannot fight the entire population without weapons, but there is the chance that the suddenness of our attack may count a lot in our favour, and if we once got clear of the village we could at least cause the warriors to sweat a bit before they caught us again.”

The Captain’s proposal was allowed after a brief discussion to be the only feasible scheme by which they had the slightest hope of bettering their position, and without loss of more time, seeing that the people had gone to their various houses, and the bridge guards were inclined to go to sleep

among the cool palm-fronds, they prepared to put it into effect. The Captain had the idea that the priests might hurry on the proceedings when they got the people away, for fear that they might be disposed to deal less harshly with the white men. This was another reason for prompt action, and now that the bridge afforded the means of getting to land they would be foolish to neglect the opportunity.

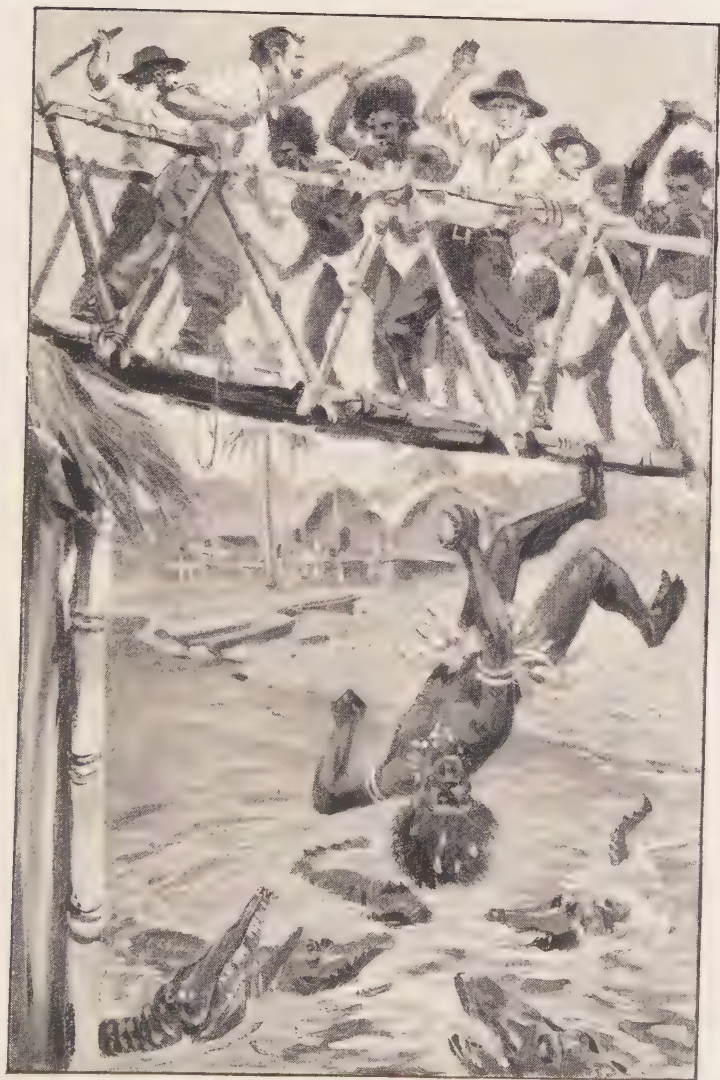
They slipped from their buildings and carefully and noiselessly climbed up the gabled roof to the crocodile ridge of the house. Hiding behind the huge painted wooden saurian until the guards at the far end of the bridge had made themselves comfortable in the shade, they then stepped out on the swaying structure and ran swiftly across. They hardly expected to gain the shore without trouble, but they might have managed to do so had not the movement of the bridge betrayed their presence. The natives sprang out to meet them at once, and then ensued as strange a battle as ever was fought: five white men, armed with one revolver, two knives, and some spars torn from the bridge, against a dozen powerful savages wielding clubs, and down below a seething, snapping mass of crocodiles leaping upwards to catch those who fell through the bridge or were thrown over in the struggle.

The bridge swayed and rocked and sagged dangerously, and clubs and bamboo rods rose and

fell on human heads with amazing rapidity. The warriors did not shout as was usual with their people while fighting. Probably they did not wish the people to know that they had been caught napping, as the penalty for such an offence might be extremely drastic. But they could fight fairly well, notwithstanding, although they must have been severely handicapped by not being able to use their lung-power.

The white men fought with a coolness that helped them considerably, yet with the recklessness of men who knew they were fighting for their lives. They had no personal animosity towards their opponents ; they only desired to get past them. This was a point which the warriors did not grasp, for they could not understand why any man should not fight for the sake of the fight itself. Possibly Irish Mike was of a similar opinion ; he seemed to glory in the struggle.

"Come on, old coffee-face !" he cried to the leading warrior as he deftly tipped his first antagonist over the bridge. "I'm just the man to give you all you want." A club came down on his head just then, and Mike saw more stars than he could count before his eyes. Blindly he turned and groped for the man who had dealt the blow, and the next moment that warrior, too, went over the bridge. Mike seized his discarded club and rushed at the man he had challenged, but that individual fled down the ladderway with a



HE DEFTLY TIPPED HIS FIRST ANTAGONIST OVER THE BRIDGE.

yell of terror, and Mike was free to assist his comrades. They, too, had been doing great things. Big Sam had received a blow on the head that would have stunned an ordinary man, but it only maddened him, and the dealer of the blow went over the bridge in company with the Captain's first victim. Vic Charlie and Frenchy had closed with two warriors, and would have accounted for them had the matter been a trial of strength and skill between man and man. That it was not was soon brought home to them when a couple of the free natives each clubbed one of the comrades and sent them reeling to the end of the bridge. Next moment Big Sam and the Captain had squared matters by attending to the two champions with clubs no longer required by their late owners, and both Frenchy and Charlie, white-faced and bleeding, joined in the fray again almost instantly.

The battle was now in favour of the white men, so far as numbers went, but they were past being able to do more damage. A stalwart warrior rushed at the Captain with a club brandished on high as the latter leaned against the side of the bridge to recover his breath. A moment later and it would have been all over with the Captain, but the fight-loving Irishman interfered, and it was the native who went down under a mighty club stroke.

The prospectors were now on the landward end

of the aerial structure, and suddenly realising this, the Captain cried, "Come on, boys! Run for it now. The road is open!"

"I've just another head to crack, an' I'll be with ye," Mike answered. "Whiroo! I've done it. Is there any more Tugeris wanting a bit of fun? If so, trot them out, an' begorrah! I'll give them a month's supply." Mike glared around, but he got no reply. The warriors didn't know what he was saying, and if they had known, none were in a fit state to wield a club for the honour of the Tugeris. They had got all the "fun" (as Mike termed it) they wanted, and those who had gone over the bridge were no longer interested.

Sliding down the rope ladder, the prospectors reached the ground safely, and at once began running towards the stockade they could see on their left, the side nearest them, but farthest away from the houses. "If we can only get over this, boys," the Captain cried, "we may beat them after all."

"I don't like going away without my rifle," Vic Charlie grumbled. "I'm no good in a nigger fight without it, and my head feels like as if it had a saw-mill working inside it. I move we go and hunt for our shooters—the natives have no right to them." Charlie reeled and fell into Big Sam's arms; the blow he had received had been too much for him. Frenchy, too, was very shaky about the feet, and the Captain himself was suffering from

an ugly bruise on the head which caused his vision to be blurred. They had no hats, and the sun's rays streamed down on their battered heads with maddening, relentless fury. Irish Mike ran back to assist Big Sam with Vic Charlie, and half dragging, half carrying him, they staggered on, blinded with blood and perspiration.

But now a great commotion arose in the village. Drums sounded out and frenzied shouts rent the air. The escaping prisoners had been seen, and the entire population was up at once with whatever arms came most convenient. With yells of rage the swiftest warriors darted from the moving throng and bore down upon the hapless white men. At the same moment another detachment rushed to cut them off from the stockade.

"We've lost the rubber, mates," said Big Sam, stopping and drawing his revolver, the only weapon among the party. He spoke as coolly as if he were discussing the weather, but the grim look on his face spoke volumes.

"Well, they cyan only kill us," Irish Mike responded, "an' begorrah ! it will cost them some of their best men first."

"That's just the point," said Big Sam very quietly, looking at the Captain. "Old man," he went on, addressing the last named, "we've been mates in many a tight hole before, and we've stood by each other in good luck and bad luck. Now, I don't like being mangled by crocodiles, and I

don't want to peg out at any sacrifice. I have six bullets in this lead-squirter, and there are only five men here. I propose I give that crocodile-man the first, and that we each take one of what's left. You're boss, so say quickly ; the mob will be on top of us in two shakes."

All the men were silent. They awaited the Captain's reply with almost indifference ; they knew there was no hope, and they were past caring. If only Macalister had arrived !

The Captain paused and wiped the mist from his eyes. The stockade was already cut off from them, and a crazed horde of bloodthirsty savages were closing in on all sides. For a moment he hesitated ; death from a bullet was preferable to slow torture. The men waited, and Sam played abstractedly with his Colt. He also kept an eye on the crocodile-man, who, despite his unwieldy garb, was keeping well in the front ranks of the howling mob.

"No, Sam," the Captain suddenly said. "We are white men. We are prospectors. We'll face the worst they can do without flinching. It can't last very long. Thank God, Dandy is not here ! If we had brought the lad into this— Ah ! a chance yet, men ! Quick, the canoes !" He had just noticed the boats close beside them, the space from which he had removed one the night before being still vacant.

"Into them !" yelled Irish Mike, brandishing a

club. "Begorrah ! I'll foight the lot until yez are all aboard."

"I'll stop them for a bit, I reckon," muttered Big Sam, raising his revolver. "Go on, boys, help Charlie into a boat, and Mike and I will hold the niggers back." He fired at the nearest native as he spoke, and the warrior yelled, turned a somersault, and lay still. But the rest never hesitated. Sam dropped the next nearest of the advancing crowd, and Mike rushed out to meet a couple of swift warriors approaching from the stockade side. By this time the Captain and Frenchy had helped Vic Charlie into the largest canoe and pushed it into the water, and Mike, after having dealt out his compliments to his victims, was looking for more heads to crack. Big Sam was saving his shots until he had accounted for the crocodile-man, as he seemed to be one of the most important men among the people. Strangely enough, that individual kept out of Sam's range with remarkable cleverness.

"Come on, boys," called the Captain. "Get on board at once. The fight will be more even on the water."

Sam and Mike rushed at the nearest canoe and next moment were out on the stagnant lake, breathing fire and slaughter to every Tugeri who cared to come within their range.

And they soon came. Canoes laden with warriors shot out from points all along the bank

and very soon the two crafts which contained the white men were surrounded. The prospectors took full advantage of the fact that the warriors would not use their spears—they wished to preserve them alive for sacrifice—and boatload after boatload they overturned in the water. Soon the crocodiles infesting the tapu-house were drawn to the scene of conflict, and they overturned many more fragile crafts. Big Sam kept looking for the crocodile-man with the sole intention of putting a bullet through him, but that personage had suddenly disappeared, and Sam began to think that he might have been one of the many who had gone to feed the real crocodiles. One thing was now certain, and that was that the sacred crocodiles would not be very hungry when the time came for them to receive the white men.

The battle raged fiercely, the crocodiles strangely enough helping the prospectors considerably by confining their attention to the overladen native boats. Probably they liked their own people best.

But human endurance has an end and five men could not fight hundreds for ever. The end came early in the afternoon, when the five prospectors found themselves once more lying in bonds in the tapu-house. They had done their utmost, and, tired and weary, they now awaited their fate with absolute indifference.

CHAPTER XII

THE GODS DECIDE

THE sun slowly descended in the western heavens and its scorching rays shone straight upon the tapu-house, causing its atmosphere to become unbearably hot and stuffy. The prisoners lay upon the floor and perspired. They were hungry and thirsty and tired, but they had no further interest in worldly affairs, for they knew that that night they would set out on a longer prospecting trip than they had ever undertaken, and they had no maps or charts of the road. The Captain did his best to make his comrades look upon things as befitting men about to die, but without much success. Big Sam recounted the men to whom he owed a pick, a shovel, a plug of tobacco, and one or two other things, and bemoaned the fact that he couldn't pay them back. Vic Charlie, now recovered, also remembered some little obligations, and Irish Mike had a great grievance because before leaving Esperance Valley he had promised to give Jack the Nigger a thrashing, and now he couldn't keep his word.

Frenchy had no special regrets except that he

wouldn't see his native land again ; but as he was with comrades whom he had grown to look upon as part of himself, he didn't mind much, and a shrug of his shoulders had been his only answer to the Captain's inquiry if he had anything left undone. The Captain himself said there were lots of things which required his future attention, but as he had allowed them to pass so long, they might as well go altogether now. " We'll show these Tugeris that prospectors don't fear death, boys," he concluded. " We've been comrades in life and maybe we'll yet be comrades in the Great Beyond."

" Has anybody got a match? " Big Sam interrupted. " I've got a bit of tobacco left in my pipe and I might as well smoke it."

The Captain silently handed Sam his waterproof match-case, and for some time after nothing could be heard but Sam's puffing or anything seen through the cloud of smoke he raised. Suddenly he withdrew his pipe and handed it to the Captain. " I forgot, old man," he said, " there's a pull left yet though." The Captain took a few draws and passed the pipe to Frenchy, who did the same and then gave Mike a chance, and finally Vic Charlie got it.

About a score of warriors, fully armed, stood guard over the prisoners in the tapu-house, their duty being to prevent any attempt at another escape, but their presence was unnecessary as there was no fight left in the white men.

“Have any of you fellows ever been sampled by a croc. before?” Vic Charlie asked after a spell of silence during which the natives murmured words of approval among each other concerning the white men’s pluck.

“I had a mate who was dined on by an alligator, once,” Big Sam answered reflectively. “But it’s nothing boys ; a bite or two does the trick and it’s all over. It is a blamed good thing poor Dandy isn’t with us, boys ; he might have broken down, poor lad, and given these ring-nosed niggers some satisfaction.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the Captain. “Dandy has no yellow streak in him, I’m sure. I only fear that he and Macalister will arrive here after all is over and—and follow us.”

“I never knew of old Mac being late before,” mused Mike, “but I’ll bet my whiskers he’ll make the all-fired idiot of a Warden pay pretty stiff for us. He’ll raise all the boys of Esperance Valley and they’ll wipe the Tugeris out, leaving no more of them than their blamed old sacred crocs. will leave of us.”

“Ah, well, I hear them working at the bridge now,” the Captain said. “I suppose they are making everything ready for our performance. Boys, I do not advise any further attempt to escape ; it is useless. When I go I’ll take all I can of the priests with me, but even allowing the crocodiles are gorged on the food they have had

to-day, we have no chance. Make your peace with the one God, and meet your fate like brave men. After all, man has got to die some time, and what does it matter how or when?"

"I never knew the Captain was a preacher, boys," sang out Vic Charlie. "Some of you fellows might hit him on the softest part he's got. How can any one get a decent sleep if he keeps spouting and that crocodile-man and his gang keep on working at the trap door in that bridge? I tell you it isn't fair. I'd give my pants to get a shot at that old reptile priest."

"I move we sing something to kill the time," suggested Big Sam. "What's the good of sleeping now when we'll soon have to get up?"

"Yes, let us sing!" cried Frenchy. "Let us show ze people ve do not death fear. Vat shall eet be zat we sing?"

"The 'Marseillaise' would go well," the Captain said, "and probably the Tugeris have never heard it."

"Blow the 'Marseillaise'!" grunted Irish Mike. "'The Wearing o' the Green' is far better an' shure every one knows it——"

"I don't," put in Vic Charlie. "I'd rather wear my own pants. How about 'Home, Sweet Home'?"

"Rot!" ejaculated Big Sam. "What's wrong with 'There is a Happy Land'?"

"Oh, we all know there is down in Sydney

and Melbourne," Vic Charlie answered, " but we're in New Guinea at present. Let's sing something sensible, like ' Ask a Policeman ' or ' We Won't go Home till Morning. ' "

" Too sentimental," Mike commented. " Now, ' Paddy Leary ' is a moighty fine song, boys, an' it's thrue, too——"

" ' God Save the King ' would be the most appropriate," the Captain said. " But hullo ! Frenchy is asleep, and so is Big Sam. Our concert is postponed, boys ; we can't sing without the help of the only men among us who really can sing. After all, perhaps we'd better go to sleep too."

And they did, and while they slept the guards talked much among themselves as to the strange behaviour of the white men who didn't seem to appreciate fully the great honour that was about to be done them. The natives knew, for their priests had told them, that he who became the food of the gods lived for ever, and they reasoned that the prisoners were very fortunate indeed, seeing they could have been killed in so many other ways so easily.

The moon was shining over the tapu-house when the white men awoke, and from the bustle among their guards and the clamour outside they knew that the time for the great ceremony was at hand.

" I'm a bit hungry, mates," observed Vic Charlie, sitting up. " I wonder if it is near tucker-time? "

" I think so," the Captain replied. " The trap-

door in the bridge seems all ready and all work has ceased. I can still see that fiendish crocodile-man out there though ; he must be as hungry as we are, for he has never been off duty. He's examining the ropes now."

Just then a series of shouts of acclamation burst out from the populace on shore, and the warriors guarding the prisoners responded, and then signed to the unfortunate men that it was time for them to go through their part. The victims arose with a laugh and signified their readiness to proceed—in language terse and characteristic, Frenchy assuming an air like that of an aristocrat going to execution in Paris during the Revolution, which made his comrades laugh again.

A number of war-drums now sounded out some signal well understood by the guards, and the prisoners were unshackled and lifted up to the roof, where they were marshalled and marched out upon the bridge. The entire population of the village had assembled to witness the feeding of the sacred crocodiles, and their shouts on beholding the prisoners echoed and re-echoed for fully ten minutes. Most of them had lost relatives in the fight with the white men during the day, but now they were about to have satisfaction ; doubly so, because their priests had informed them that the present feeders of the crocodiles would not have everlasting life because of the enormity of their sins.

The prospective performers laughed and chatted to each other, totally disregarding the people around them. They felt that they were upholding the dignity of the white race by showing their utter indifference. They were arranged about the middle of the bridge on a part of the structure which had been cut through and apparently was only held in place by several long suspension ropes which stretched from the shore platform to the ridge of the tapu-house. It was all most cleverly devised with a view to dramatic effect. At the signal from the crocodile-priest the men in attendance would cut the fibrous ropes on both sides and the prisoners would be precipitated into the gaping mouths of the expectant crocodiles. These creatures, notwithstanding their gorge that day already, were waiting underneath now, their baleful eyes gleaming and their great jaws snapping in anticipation.

A band of animal priests marshalled themselves on either side of the prisoners, on the solid part of the bridge of course, and the rest of the available safe space was taken up by the most famous warriors of the tribe. The commoner and younger natives, and the women, had to be content with positions on the bank, but still their view would be by no means obscured, and they were wonderfully happy.

The crocodile-priest was master of ceremonies, and he had already taken up his position on the

platform among the trees, so that he could superintend operations generally, and see that the ropes were cut properly and at the exact moment. Why he denied himself the pleasure of officiating on the bridge itself was not clear to the white men, unless the reasons were that his long tail could not be easily manipulated on the swaying structure.

The elephant-like priest was in charge of operations on the bridge, but he was well backed by a small army of satellites representing animals and birds of weird and awesome shape. He took up an attitude doubtless very effective from his point of view, and addressed the prisoners, and while he spoke a silence fell over the listening people.

"Cut it short, old two tails," Big Sam interrupted, after he had spoken for a few minutes, "we're in a hurry, you know."

"Yes, write it all on our tombstones," advised Irish Mike, "we're getting mighty cold standing here. Get on with the circus."

The priest paid no attention to the words of the two white warriors. Perhaps he thought they were asking to be excused from taking part in the ceremony, but soon after he concluded, and a great cheer rent the air. What he had been saying was not known to those whom he addressed, for even the Captain had not been listening. When he ceased the drums sounded out loudly, the people redoubled their vocal efforts, the priests saw that

they were clear of the tapu door, and the crocodile-man held up his hand as a signal. A dozen warriors with gleaming knives in their hands rushed to obey his sign; the drums rang out louder, the populace yelled as if endowed with metal lungs, the priests chanted some dirge, the crocodiles reached high out of the water, and the crocodile-priest sat on a branch and watched the prisoners.

"Well, boys, goodbye," the Captain cried, "a speedy journey to you all——"

"I'll remember Macalister for not coming," muttered Vic Charlie.

"I'll wring the neck of the Warden's ghost when it comes over the river," said Big Sam.

Frenchy said nothing, and Irish Mike began whistling "St. Patrick's Day."

Pandemonium continued. Now the knives flashed in the moonlight, the ropes were severed, the bridge shook violently, the trap seemed to separate itself from the rocking structure, and then, amidst terrific shrieks, the entire mass dropped shudderingly into the water, spars, ropes, and splinters flying in all directions. For a moment the sacred crocodiles were alarmed, but, quickly recovering, they lashed the water into foam with their enormous tails and rushed in to participate in what the fates had given them for supper.

The yells and shrieks rent the heavens, but the drums suddenly stopped beating, and the people

on shore rushed into the pestilential pools with spears and clubs.

The white men gazed round blankly. They were unhurt ! They were still standing on the trap ! What had happened ? What was the meaning of all the commotion below ? Why were the people fighting with the crocodiles in the water ? And why were they not down among them ? They gazed at each other, mutely inquiring for any explanation. An inferno now raged on shore and beneath them, for they were hanging in mid-air. Were they dead ? Had they really passed through death ? Suddenly light flashed upon them. A miracle had happened. The bridge itself had gone down, and the trap had been left hanging on the suspension ropes ! What did it all mean ? All the priests who had been beside them, and all the famous warriors, were fighting for their lives among the sacred crocodiles, and they, the designed victims, were still intact. The sight beneath was horrible ; the grotesquely garbed priests had no chance, for their encasements retarded their movements, and they could not even keep afloat. But the spectators had rushed in to help them, and the moon shed its eerie light over a scene of conflict surely stranger than had ever taken place before. The crocodiles would not require more food for a long time ! Only the being who represented them among the people was likely to survive that fearful night unharmed. He still sat upon the tree limb he had

perched himself upon before giving the signal to cut the ropes, and his long tail hung down into space motionless and inert. He was watching the struggling mass in the pool with a wonderful coolness considering that the men were his own people, and that a catastrophe had occurred which meant practically the extermination of the priestcraft.

Up on the four supporting ropes the little section of the fallen bridge swung to and fro with its living freight. For a time the men thought it would follow the main part, but soon they realised that it was quite safe. By some most extraordinary freak of circumstances the natives must have cut the ropes which held the bridge instead of those on which the small trap was hung. Truly the white men had been saved by a miracle.

Amazed, horror-stricken, and helpless, they looked down on the moonlit pool now tinged crimson with the life fluid of priests, warriors, and common people. The great sacred saurians were having a royal feast indeed, and they rushed through the water maiming, drowning, and devouring every living creature their huge tails or jaws came near.

The end soon came, although to the watchers overhead the awful scene seemed to last for hours. The crocodiles became less ferocious and more cowardly as their appetites became satisfied, and in time retreated under the tapu-house before the fierce onslaught of the natives who had come

to the assistance of their unfortunate priests. The Tugeris certainly were brave people, and they knew how to fight crocodiles. Swimming and diving like amphibious creatures themselves, they drove their spears through the eyes into the brains of their one-time sacred treasures, and deftly dodging the mighty sweeps of the tails, they fought on until they were left victors. By this time those of the priests who had been able had crawled out of the death pool and, lying gasping on the bank, were ministered unto by the old men and women. It was noticeable, however, that much sympathy was not wasted on the priests, although wherever a wounded warrior lay, at once became the centre of people all eager to alleviate his suffering by any means they could devise. Needless to say, some of those means were startling and highly original. The priests were not greatly loved by the people, it seemed ; probably they used their supposed occult powers too freely among them, and brought about submission to their will by methods not pleasing to fearless warriors. Then, among a fighting people like the Tugeris warriors only were of use to the community, while priests were of the nature of parasites, living on the best the people could give, yet producing nothing in return. Any man not fit to be a warrior could be a priest, but few priests could take a warrior's place. Probably this was the reason the spiritual chiefs received so little attention from any but the old men and

women ; their places could easily be filled, but the loss of a fearless fighter was an occurrence to be mourned by the entire tribe. Somehow the white men high on their aerial perch were glad that comparatively few warriors had gone to feed the sacred crocodiles. They had no regrets concerning the animal-like priests.

"Well, mates," observed Big Sam, breaking a silence which had ensued since the bridge collapsed, "I reckon we've come through the first test mighty well ; I'll never give up hope after this. Just fancy having front seats at what was to be our own funeral——"

"It may be ours yet, Sam, so cheer up," consoled Mike. "They'll likely kill us now and cook us for their own breakfast."

"No," the Captain said. "The Tugeris keep their word. We'll be put through the fire test now ; I wonder if another miracle will happen."

"I'll bet it does," put in Vic Charlie. "Anything can happen after this. My ! we might be able to clear out if we were down on solid land ; the people don't seem to know we're upstairs."

"Oh, yes, they do," said the Captain. "The crocodile-priest has just descended and told them. See, they are arguing about us now. Ah ! those remaining priests want to kill us right off ; they are blaming us for their misadventure——"

"That's right, Captain ; you listen to their yarns so that we'll know what kind of miracle we've got

to look for next," advised Vic Charlie, recovering his spirits wonderfully.

"The warriors won't hear of it," continued the Captain. "They are demanding that we should be put through the fires at once. They see the crocodile gods do not want us, and they are anxious to conciliate the Fire God with our bodies."

"Moighty considerate of them," said Mike. "Suppose we go down and join their corroboree. We cyan easily work ourselves along these ropes and down the ladders hanging from the trees?"

All thought it was time they evacuated their aerial position, as nothing could be gained by remaining upon the fragile wind-tossed platform, seeing that at any moment the natives could cut the ropes and precipitate them into the water if they so desired. On the other hand, if they were on the ground again they might make another attempt to escape under cover of the darkness, and in any case they had already passed through the first part of the test imposed upon them, and unless the Tugeris had suddenly become liars as well as cannibals and other things, they would not be molested more than was necessary to prepare them for the next stage, the fire test. The knowledge that when the natives required their presence they would probably bring them down abruptly also helped them to decide, and so they began to work their way along the sagging ropes towards the platform among the trees.

To most men this would not have been an easy task, but to the five prospectors it presented no difficulty, for well they knew how to cross a river by means of a rope stretched between the two banks, and being men of remarkable nerve the fact that the rope was stretched so high above the water made no difference. Each man tied his feet together with short pieces of fibre entangled in the ropes which had broken off from the main bridge stays when it fell. Each stood with one foot on either side of the chief existing supporting rope while doing so, and thus when he sat down and stretched himself out horizontally along the trap platform his weight was held up by the loop between his feet. Hanging inverted in this way, the Captain launched himself out on the main rope and pulled himself hand under hand across the intervening space to the platform which had formed the pivot upon which the bridge had swung. In a few minutes his comrades had also safely negotiated the passage, and resting for a space to regain their breath, they then slid down the ladderway and landed in the midst of a crowd of natives who had been watching their progress. They were instantly seized and thrown to the ground, and some warriors sat upon them, while the debate as to their fate proceeded. Finally it was settled that the prisoners would be offered to the Fire God as originally sentenced, and the people applauded, and the drums rattled out a signal. There were only

a few priests in evidence, even the crocodile-priest having made himself scarce, but those left seemed determined to provide a show for the people that would make full recompense for all that had happened already.

Then the unfortunate prisoners were marched away to the centre of the village, where apparently the Fire God had his headquarters. No chance of escape presented itself, for they formed the centre of a hundred fully armed natives. Mike, Sam, and Charlie told the natives what they thought of them in language which was at least fervent, but as the Tugeris knew no language but their own the eloquence was wasted. Frenchy had reassumed his proud air, and he walked along as if he were the king of the people around him. The Captain was thinking, but he didn't tell his thoughts; they were too vague, and the central idea was wild and improbable in the extreme.

Soon the square in the middle of the village was reached; the general cooking fires still smouldered, and the Captain guessed that many ducks and wild pigs lay nicely cooked among the ashes. But he was not now on a food-hunting foray, and he did not even mention to his comrades that the scene was familiar to him.

Still, there were some differences in the surroundings. The long, quaintly built, palm-leaf-thatched houses were the same, and the haystack-shaped dwellings of the commoner people with

the hole at the bottom for ingress and egress, were also as he had last seen them round the square. It was in the square itself that some alterations had been made, and he soon realised that the changes were in connection with the Fire God ceremony. Four raised platforms heaped with light brushwood and dried grass now took up the greater part of the square, and each pile was connected with a long, fibrous rope to a fifth and smaller heap of inflammable material upon the ground in the centre of the square. Many men were still working at the four Fire God piles, heaping scrub on top and generally preparing for a spectacular conflagration. The crocodile-priest was again much in evidence, although what part he played in the Fire God's affairs was not quite evident, unless he was deputising for some of those who had played chief parts in the crocodile drama. Several other animal-men were running about, but their numbers had been sadly reduced, and each apparently was working with a strenuous energy which denoted that he was doing more than his own legitimate share. The crocodile monstrosity was indefatigable ; he seemed to be everywhere at once, superintending the work at the raised piles of fire material, at the connecting ropes, and at the small central ground heap of dried leaves and grass. The elephant-like creature acted as a good second, and his presence surprised the white men greatly, for they had seen him go down with the bridge.

The prisoners were halted in the square amidst the entire population now again assembled, and when a signal was given that all was ready one of the priests stepped into a prominent position and addressed the multitude. The Captain translated roughly as he went along, and this is what he said : "People of the noble Tugeri tribe, you have all seen what happened to-night. You all think that your sacred men have lost favour with the gods of our people, and you have cast scorn upon them. But the gods are all-wise, and they will not suffer their priests to be wronged, and you shall now see that I speak truly. By the law of our people, which is as old as the hills, and will last while the stream flows down the mountain-side, the white devils captured by our brave warriors were sentenced. They have passed through their first test because of some devilish magic they have, but they shall not so easily escape the wrath of the Fire God, and after he has prepared them they shall be given to the ants, for the Tugeri may not eat their vile flesh. But to prove that your priests are protected by the gods, and that the magic of the white devils is as nothing to them, your priests have arranged the fire heaps you see. The white devils will be placed in one and equal numbers of priests will go into the others. Then, at a signal from our chief priest the central fire shall be kindled, and the Fire God himself shall decide whom he wishes to destroy and whom he desires to save.

A fiery message will run along the rope from the central fire to where those whom he does not like are placed, and those who find favour with him will not be harmed, for the Fire God will not stretch forth his hand against them. Then shall the priests of the people vindicate themselves, and they shall receive much honour, for hath not the Fire God told them? "

"What a liar ! " was Big Sam's comment when the speech was finished. "I reckon that fellow could give points to some fellows I know any day. Tell him he is talking through his hat, Captain, and that if the Fire God were left to himself he would probably do with his priests as the crocodile-boss did with the other lot."

"No," said the Captain, "I'll not speak. All I could say would not help matters, and as things are we may with all honour escape if we can. Of course, the ropes or trains leading from the central fire to the one designed for us are steeped in resin or some other very inflammable stuff the priests know, while the connections to the other piles are treated with some fire-resisting compound. Still, boys, perhaps another miracle will happen, and this time we'll be able to take full advantage of our chances ; if not, we can meet our fate as we were ready to do before."

"Good old miracles ! " sang out Big Sam. "They are as good as Macalister, any day. Tell them to hurry up, then, Captain ; I'm mighty

curious to know what is the next act. Of course, the priests mean us to be cooked nicely for the ants, but the Tugeri people are sillier than I ever thought they were if they believe that they are taking equal risks with us. My Fire God would be my rifle if I had it, and I know what side he would take——”

“Shut up, Sam!” Irish Mike admonished. “Cyant ye lave off using your speaking-machine for a minute? I nearly had a chance of getting the crocodile-fellow by his windpipe a moment ago, but when you spoke he cleared out.”

Just then the long drums sang out some well-known message, and the people formed in a great circle all round the open space which formed the square. The priests climbed to their positions on three of the piles of scrub, and some warriors hauled the prisoners up to the top of the fourth. They were not bound in any way, doubtless because the people knew they could not possibly escape, and that if they did jump from the fire they would be in a state more attractive to the ants.

The people yelled as before, and the crocodile-priest himself prepared to apply the light to the central fire.

“Goodbye again, mates,” said Vic Charlie. “I’m getting tired of saying goodbye and not going away——”

“Suppose we break away now, Captain?” suggested Big Sam. “We might get clear in the

confusion, and anyhow I'd rather die almost any other way than by burning."

"Stay where you are, boys," the Captain answered. "Give the gods a chance to show their powers. Certainly we'll jump for it when the fire comes our way, but on no account interfere with the Fire God's plan until we know what it is——"

"The Captain has gone off his head, mates," Vic Charlie broke in. "He believes in the blamed gods as much as the blamed niggers."

"Begorrah! I'm beginning to believe in their wisdom myself," said Mike. "I'll swear that crocodile-fellow with the torch in his hand winked at me this minute. He was looking up here, anyway, although I expect it was to see what way the wind was blowing."

At that moment the crocodile-priest applied his torch and a deep silence fell over all. The full moon shone down from a cloudless sky, and the air was oppressively close and sultry. The small fire flamed up instantly, and the black men and white men held their breaths. High leaped the tongues of flame, and the brushwood crackled and shot out sparks. Then one of the connecting ropes became a fiery mass and a brilliant flame swiftly sped out from the fire towards one of the pyres. The people yelled with frenzied excitement; their gods were avenging themselves, and the white men would be food for the ants. Suddenly the uproar ceased; another ball of fire

had shot out along one of the ropes, and even as they looked a third rope became incandescent, and transmitted its flaring message onward towards the heap of scrub it was meant to set alight if the great Fire God willed. And the Fire God seemed to be very willing, for already two of the stacks were blazing and a third would be in a second or two. And the only pile which the fire did not seem inclined to touch was that upon which the white men were placed ! Its connecting rope absolutely refused to carry the fiery spark. The silence now was awful, but next moment it was broken by the shrieks of the priests as they leaped from the flaming fires upon which they had so magnanimously placed themselves. Evidently the Fire God was in sarcastic mood when he tried to burn his own faithful deputies.

Meanwhile, the white men looked on calmly. Another miracle had happened, they could see, but what it all meant was a question unanswerable. The three fires on which the priests had taken up their positions were now blazing furiously, and yet the condemned prisoners were intact !

"Say, Captain," said Big Sam, "tell the beggars to bring on their ants now. I reckon we don't need to fear anything their gods will do to us ; they are working for us."

"I don't think we'll wait on ants," the Captain replied, "but don't move until I give the signal. I know what has happened."

The clamour was now as if pandemonium had broken loose a second time that night, and priests rushed about frantically, their weird adornments ablaze. Warriors shouted, the women shrieked, and the poor priests screamed with pain. Truly they were having a bad time ; they had been scorched in the fires themselves instead of the white devils, and they could not understand why, seeing that they had specially prepared the ropes leading to the pile on which the prisoners had been placed.

A fight suddenly broke out between the elephant-priest and another creature in a boar's skin, but the populace didn't seem to mind. The elephant was getting the worst of it because of the unwieldy nature of his garb, and both beings rolled on the ground in deadly grips just at the foot of the white men's perch.

"Go on, elephant !" yelled Irish Mike. "Tickle him in the ribs—— Oh, fair play there, you beggars, let them foight it out themselves !"

Another priest in the guise of an enormous dog rushed up to help the boar-man, and had thus occasioned the protest.

At that moment the crocodile-priest waddled out from the crowd of howling humanity, and with surprising speed approached the three fighting priests. He did not hesitate a moment, but producing a club from some recess in his scaly garment, he dealt two blows in rapid succession,

one on each of the two uppermost heads—the boar-priest's and the dog-priest's.

“Now, boys!” cried the Captain. “Run as you never ran before. Make for the stockade.” He leaped from the top of the unfired brushwood on to the platform and then quickly slid to the ground. His comrades were down almost at the same moment, ready to make another fight for their lives.

“Bhoys,” cried Irish Mike, as the others prepared to run, “I don't care now whether they turn on the ants or not, but I'm going to free the poor Tugeris of their crocodile-priest.”

“You are a wee bit too late for that, Mike,” the crocodile-priest spoke. “I did that last night——”

“Macalister!” yelled the men in unbounded amazement.

“Run, ye deevils, run!” the priest cried. “I cannā dae any more for ye. Dandy, show them the way.”

The elephant-priest rose to his feet. “Follow me, boys,” he cried, running off, “the Professor has got the rifles.” Into the shadows the white men sped, and the crocodile-priest stayed behind only long enough to half strangle another monstrosity who had just come alongside.

CHAPTER XIII

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

FOLLOWING the fleet-footed elephant-priest, who tore off his encumbering garments as he ran, the white men made towards the stockade which they could just see a few hundred yards distant. They asked no questions: they were in Macalister's hands, and that was enough for them. All the miracles were now explained, and each wondered why he had not seen Macalister's ruse earlier. They climbed over the palisade by means of a rope hanging ready in position, but already the angry people were after them, yelling like demons. The priests blamed the white men for their misfortunes, and they were right although they didn't think so themselves.

"Look here, Mr. Elephant-man," cried Irish Mike, as the comrades picked themselves up on the safe side of the bamboo barrier. "This is all very foine, but would ye mind telling me who are our friends among your kind and who are not. Where is Dandy, for instance? and I heard somebody sing out something about the Professor——?"

"You want to know too much at once, Mike,"

answered the elephant-priest, discarding the last of his outer dress. "I'm Dandy, and that priest climbing over now, and whom Big Sam is ready to choke, is the Professor. He's got your rifles, I expect, so you should tell Sam not to ill-use him ; he's really a good fellow, and he makes a better priest even than Mac——"

"Dandy," said the Captain, as the men assisted the heavily laden priest to the ground, "you have grown into a man since we saw you last. You are no longer a boy. Years seem to have been added to the youth we knew in camp."

"Only two days and perhaps a night, Captain," Dandy laughed, "but that time with Macalister is equal to some years so far as gaining wisdom is concerned, and my black face may make me look much older. But the warriors are on our track : I hear them, and they are much more dangerous than the crafty priests. We must get away from here at once."

"But Mac?" asked Irish Mike. "Where is he? Why is he not with us?"

"He's always getting into trouble," growled Big Sam. "I'll bet he's play-acting with the blamed niggers, and——"

"He is," interrupted Dandy, "and if he were not we should all be prisoners again in a few minutes. We cannot fight the Tugeri warriors, however much we might fool the priests, and he is at present leading them anywhere he can away from the point where we crossed."

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the being dressed as an enormous bird of paradise, "kindly pick out your own weapons as soon as you can. I must go back for an extremely rare specimen of the——"

"Blue-scarlet-green bird of paradise Brown," finished Vic Charlie, "and I reckon I'll go and help you, old man. You've given me new life with this rifle, although I'm mighty puzzled to know how you got them."

"Mr. Macalister discovered where they were, and commissioned me to get them. I trust, gentlemen, you will permit me to wear my present garments for some time yet. I am not quite used to going about entirely naked, and Mr. Macalister insisted on my leaving his trousers behind when we came after you. Of course, my skin is dyed black, and therefore not so conspicuous, but believe me, gentlemen, I will conform to custom in matters of dress as I am able ; meanwhile, I must get that wonderful specimen."

"Not to-night, Professor," said Dandy, who had now stripped himself to the skin. "We'll come back for it some other time. I heard Mac's signal a moment ago ; he'll be here directly. He's got the warriors off our track now."

"Just listen to the cook, boys !" cried Vic Charlie admiringly. "He talks like a blamed book, and as if he had been among niggers all his life. I'll bet my shirt there isn't another cook between here and Sydney can come anywhere near Dandy at baking damper or fighting natives."

"I was a priest, Charlie, not a warrior," Dandy laughed, getting into his own clothes, which had been left in the fork of a tree near. "Strategy is the priest's strong point, but Mac taught me more of that science these last two days than the Tugeri priests ever knew. There are your garments, Professor. Hadn't you better get into them for fear you catch cold?"

"Dear me! I didn't know it was here we discarded our clothes," said the Professor, reaching for the shirt and trousers Macalister had given him. "You have a wonderful head for locality, young man. You never lose yourself."

"Cyan ye make a decent feed for hungry prospectors come along at your whistle, Dandy?" asked Irish Mike. "A bit of tobacco, too, would go well; an' if ye could tell us how yez did the bridge and fire tricks while we are waiting on Crocodile Mac, we'd be mighty obliged." The men had now all armed themselves, and the Captain had climbed to the top of the stockade to see if he could make out what Macalister was doing.

"You'll get something to eat when Mac comes, I'm sure," Dandy answered, "and likely he'll have some tobacco, too, for he never forgets anything. As for the bridge and fire performances, they were very simple. Mac altered the position of the different sets of supporting ropes while the people slept after your first attempt to escape, and when they thought they were cutting those that held

up the trap-door they were really destroying the bridge suspenders. While he assumed command there the Professor and I attended to the fires, for all the people were watching the crocodile ceremony. Macalister had told us what to do, and we did it. We disconnected the three ropes specially prepared to resist fire with the stuff the priests use when they are performing their magic and after replacing yours with one of them we substituted the most resinous fibres we could find in the priests' storehouse for the others. The result you know. The warriors think we have gone down the river—I hear their paddles splashing——”

“Hang the warriors!” broke in Big Sam. “How did you come to be priest-fellows at all? It seems to me we might have done the same if we had had any savvy.”

“Oh, that was simply done too. We followed you, of course, and hid out here until the big feast was on. Then when Macalister, who had gone exploring inside himself first, said our chance had come we painted ourselves and went over the barrier. All the people seemed to have gathered to welcome their returned warriors, for the houses were all empty, and we went through quite a lot of them before we found your rifles and knives. But Macalister thought we could not help you much unless we knew the intentions of the priests, so we hid around the long fire where cooking operations

were going on and waited. In time the crocodile-priest came along to give some order, but he never gave it; Macalister, who was a fully-fledged native, you will remember, sprang upon him and—well, from that moment he became the crocodile-priest——”

“But I was at that fire the same night, Dandy,” called the Captain from the top of the bamboo wall.

“Yes, we saw you, and Macalister swore in four or five different languages over your mistakes, as he called them, although they saved us having to kill some of the people. You left your victims where they would most certainly be discovered in the morning, and the people would then know enemies were in their village.”

“But I didn’t dream you were near, and it mattered little to us what the natives thought.”

“Which was what made Mac angry. He said you ought to have known we wouldn’t be far off, and therefore should not have done anything to lessen our chances of getting you away. As it happened, however, things turned out well, for we—the Professor and I—robbed two of them of their wardrobes and took their places. Luckily I knew something about cooking, thanks to Vic Charlie, and the Professor is the most adaptable man I ever knew. Of course, we removed your men; they’ll now be down with Beefsteak, I expect, for they could never tell their people of the insult. We took

part in everything after that, only we never slept, and Macalister, who knew the language the people spoke, kept us well informed. To-day, when Irish Mike knocked out the bird-priest in the great fight, the Professor secretly elevated himself to the priesthood, and to-night when the bridge went down I became the elephant-priest. It seems the people must not talk to the priests unless first spoken to, so our work was easy, and you know all the rest. Macalister did everything but the Professor did wonders in seconding him——”

“My boy,” broke in the Professor, now clothed in Macalister’s garments, “if ever I get clear of this awful part of the world I’ll write a book about what you did. Didn’t I see you, alone and unarmed, attack two priests who were watching Mr. Macalister as if they suspected all was not right? and did you not go into that crocodile pool to-day with some warriors as if you feared nothing on earth?”

“Well, I wanted to get out to our comrades to give them the hint that we were here,” Dandy put in deprecatingly. “And anyhow, didn’t Mac and yourself do things far more wonderful? Didn’t you climb through the roof of the priests’ storehouse for the fiery ropes? and hadn’t you to terrify half a dozen minor priests out of their senses before you got them? and then didn’t you simply walk away with those rifles in full view of those who were guarding them?”

"They thought I was entitled to do so, as one of the few remaining priests of account," the Professor explained, also most modestly, "and I knew that Mr. Macalister was watching all the time."

"I can see you fellows have had the time of your lives," said Big Sam complainingly, "and we poor beggars were starving, and kinkled in knots while you were having the fun. I tell you we didn't think front seats on that funny old bridge worth a chunk of tobacco, and I'd have swapped my place for a back seat on shore with any fellow."

"Anyhow, I'll never believe in miracles again," put in Vic Charlie. "It all comes so mighty simple when we know how it was done, and I feel as if I would give any fellow my pants to kick me for not tumbling to the whole scheme at first."

"Keep your pants, Charlie," the Captain sang out. "I see the crocodile-man coming now. He is waddling along at a great speed, and he is carrying something which I have no doubt is cooked wild pig, duck, and other things."

"Yams, and sweet potatoes, and possibly taro," the Professor said; "the village storehouse is packed with these commodities. The Tugeris are wonderfully vegetarian, according to their stores, despite their much-talked-of cannibalistic propensities. Yet," he added thoughtfully, "I suppose they couldn't keep a man in pickle very long in this climate."

Soon the crocodile-priest was on the opposite side of the high protective barricade, and the Captain scrambled down inside to help him, for, dressed as he was, he could never pull himself up a rope without assistance.

"It's a fine night, Captain," the men heard the priest say, "but I wouldna wonder but what we'll have rain before long. I've sent all the fight-loving people down the river in their canoes, so if you are inclined for a study of the Tugeris when *not* at home you can come along and inspect the village with me."

"Not to-night, Mac. Perhaps I'll accept your invitation some other day if you will repeat it. All our comrades are waiting now on the other side, and they are as hungry as if they had not seen food for a month. If you have got anything eatable hidden under your scaly coat, I'll promise you that the boys will make short work of it."

"Aye," replied the Scot, "they are a gey hungry lot, but I suppose it's only natural for healthy men to feel hungry at times. I'm a wee bit peckish myself, and I'm sure Dandy and the Professor are, too."

"If you say another word, Macalister, before pitching over anything you've got," cried Irish Mike, "begorrah! I'll come over an' eat you. We're desperate men, an' even a blamed crocodile-priest would go down well."

"Say no more, Mike," Macalister answered.

"You've solved the problem that was troubling me. I didna see how I could climb over in this dress, and I didna want to leave it here for several reasons, but I *can* throw over something to eat, and here it comes."

And it did come ! Cooked fowls, pigs, fish, vegetables, and nuts of all kinds. How Macalister had contrived to carry all was a mystery almost as great as some other events of the night, but no man wondered at anything in connection with Macalister.

A few minutes after the hero dropped down on the outside, but his long tail was damaged considerably in the descent by striking on the top of the bamboos. He certainly was a fearsome-like figure, but the men laughed almost hysterically as they shook the black hand which he extended from underneath the middle of the monster's body, while the long tail rested upon the ground as natural as life if one forgot that crocodiles do not stand erect on their tails !

"Well, lads, I'm glad to see you all again," he cried gaily, "but we canna afford to wait here for supper. Help me to shed my skin and we'll make tracks for a safer place."

"But we don't need to run away from the niggers now, Mac," expostulated Mike. "We've got our rifles an' we're eight strong. I'd like to go back now an' make the Tugeris apologise for their behaviour."

"Not now, Mike," the Scot answered, struggling out of his unwieldy covering ; "the warriors are fighting mad now, and even the priests could not hold them in check, as I know. We'll get back to our gold-mine as soon as possible, but we'll stop for tucker when we come to the first water."

"All right, old man," agreed Big Sam, "but why not now? We don't need to worry when you are here."

"Don't you? I don't exactly fall in with you there, Sam. You see, in coming here I left a trail of priests and warriors who were interested in me, and I shouldn't wonder much but what there will be a bit of excitement when they are discovered. I hadna time to hide them, and, of course, I didna hurt them vera sairly. Thanks, boys, I feel much lighter outside that crocodile's hide ; I wouldna be a crocodile-priest by profession for all the gold in Padua. I hope the fellow I relieved will be able to take up his duties without vera much inconvenience, but I'll no promise that the warrior Dandy tackled will. You were a wee bit too rough with the poor cannibal, laddie ; what would the Warden say if he knew? "

"Perhaps not much," Dandy said with a laugh. "Possibly he might let me off easily if he knew the circumstances."

"It doesn't matter, anyway, Dandy," growled Big Sam. "I reckon we'll hang the Warden when we get back——"

"I hear warriors coming now, gentlemen," cried the Professor. "They are on Mr. Macalister's trail, I'm sure."

"And Mr. Macalister, with some friends, will be at home to them, begorrah," Irish Mike said grimly.

"Not if he knows it," Macalister returned. "Strategy, my friends, is worth an army of fighters, as you ought to know. Now those grunting warriors we hear coming up inside will lead us by their own short cut back to our gold-mine, and we might never be able to find the road ourselves. Just run along that pad a few hundred yards, Dandy, and double back again without leaving any tracks where you turn."

"What is the game, Mac?" asked the Captain. "Surely we are able to look after ourselves now?"

"I've no doubt, but we want to do more than that; we must get back to our gold valley by the short cut which the Tugeris know. We don't want to go tramping round that big mountain again back over the tracks we made coming here. Ah, here they are! Get into the scrub and lie flat, boys, and don't make a sound."

Some of the men would have liked to argue the point, but as the Captain obeyed at once, and Dandy was already speeding down the little pad which led away from the stockade, they thought better of the matter and did as directed, each, however, first providing himself with everything in

the way of food he could find, Frenchy appropriating an entire quadruped of unknown name.

All signs of the late priests' dresses were hastily pulled into the scrub by Macalister and the Captain, and then both men ran down the pad about twenty yards so as to mark it. They had barely subsided among the dense vegetation which flanked the track when half a dozen warriors leaped over the stockade, fully armed with clubs, spears, and blow-pipes. They uttered exclamations of delight when they saw the marked track in a patch of moonlight, and without hesitation ran off along its sinuous course, talking excitedly to each other, but in a language meaningless to all their listeners except the Captain and Macalister.

When they were out of earshot, the men gathered round the two leaders for an explanation, each gnawing at some portion of the animal or bird they had made their own. And Macalister satisfied their curiosity without loss of time. "Strategy," he began, "is vera much mightier than the sword, the pen, the club, the blow-pipe, or the rifle. Now, we might well have dealt severely with those warriors, but to have done that would have been foolish for more than one reason. But we'll no' go into that in the meantime."

"For which, I reckon, we poor long-suffering gold-seekers ought to be truly thankful," interjected Big Sam. "You are about as long-winded

as a burst gramophone, Macalister. Let's get out of this place and back to Esperance Valley in double quick time——"

"Man, I pity your ignorance, Sam," the Scot returned. "Will you never learn sense? Now, I am much inclined to give you a lecture on the evils of ignorance, but I'll spare you that until you pay up your bet. Let me tell you, though, that a gramophone doesn't work with wind——"

"Maybe I meant a bioscope," said Sam unabashed. "It's one of them jiggers you see running about in Sydney or Melbourne and you pump air into their wheels." Sam winked at the others as he spoke, but probably they didn't notice as it was dark. At any rate, he got no support, and Macalister went on :—

"These warriors werena' chasing me because they suspected anything spurious about me. They were after me because this night a revolution has broken out among the Tugeris and they are killing all the priests they can find. I am the chief priest, and doubtless those fellows think I have gone down to join some other tribe by the short cut. Now, I don't know the short cut but I do know there is one, and by following them we'll find it, so if you have satisfied your hunger we'll get after them now." Macalister stood once more in his fibre kilt, but there was no suspicion of a smile on his grim visage as he surveyed himself.

"But where does the blamed short cut lead

to? ” asked Irish Mike. “ I think Esperance Valley should be our first stop.”

“ The short cut leads to our gold valley,” said Macalister. “ The Tugeris attacked you by its aid, but you were led back here round the mountain instead of through it doubtless because the subterranean passage is tapu and your feet would have profaned it.” He started down the track and all followed, muttering among themselves.

“ But we don’t want to go back to that fraud of a place, Macalister,” Vic Charlie cried from the rear.

“ We do,” the Scot answered. “ I’ve a bet with Big Sam, and I am needing his trousers badly.”

“ If it’s only for that, old man, have them now,” Sam cried. “ I don’t remember what the bet was about, but as the gold wasn’t there, I don’t see why we should go back when Esperance Valley lies the other way.”

“ If you had seen Dandy’s Bonanza, lads, you would maybe hold different opinions. There is gold in that place we set out to find, although maybe no’ exactly where some of us expected. But if we don’t want to find other people working the claims Dandy and I have already pegged out for us all, we’ll have to get there pretty lively.”

“ Howling snakes ! why didn’t you say that before? ” cried Big Sam. “ Why did you waste so much time in talky-talky when there was so much to do? ”

"Don't waste any more time the same way, then," said Macalister grimly, "but keep on the track of these enterprising warriors, and eat all you can while you run."

And all did run, all talked, and all chewed at something or other all the time. Soon by the use of terser language than that which Macalister employed both parties had exchanged their stories. The night was very close and stifling, and the perspiration streamed from the men as they hurried through the dense forest, brushing the mosquitoes and other pests from their faces when they could no longer endure their attentions. Macalister suffered most from those insects, as he had a much greater area of skin to guard, but he made no complaint. Dandy led all the time; he was keen-eyed, and could see the slight tracks left by the warriors in the narrow pad without trouble, and he was wonderfully fleet of foot.

In about an hour after leaving the village stockade they found their progress suddenly barred by a steep mountain face which rose abruptly from their feet. The moon gave ample light for them to see that the peak could not easily be avoided as the rocks extended for miles on either hand, trending down on one side towards the valley through which some great river flowed, and on the other until lost among the gigantic summits near the German boundary-line. As for the pad, it had ceased altogether!

"Well, Macalister, what now?" the Captain asked as the party came to a stop. "We're getting well on for Sydney, I fancy. If we only had some flying machines we might get there in time."

"Man, your head is turned," Macalister grunted. "You've lost your bearings entirely. Sydney lies in the opposite direction, as you might observe if you gave the stars some contemplation——"

"I'll bet my whiskers we've been heading south!" cried Big Sam. "I know where Australia lies all right."

"But it's China or Japan you would come to first in this direction, Sam," Macalister said. "Who ever saw the Southern Cross behind them in the tropics when going south?" He turned and indicated the famous constellation as he spoke.

"You're right, Mac," the Captain said. "I see I am no use without my compass at night. My head is completely turned."

"Oh, well, if the Captain gives in so easily as that there's no use me holding out," Big Sam grumbled. "All the same, I'd have argued the matter out with Mac if only that blamed old Cross hadn't gone back on me."

"Maybe the Southern Cross rises in the north up here," Irish Mike suggested, but even Frenchy laughed at that strange idea, and next moment a shout from Dandy ended all discussion. He had found the track.

"This is where the natives have gone," he cried,

"and we must be very close behind them." He pointed to a tall cedar-tree growing a few feet from the rock face, and carefully lifted some fibres of cocoanut from its trunk. "See, here is part of their dress," he added, "they have climbed this tree, and unless they are still among its branches they must have gained a footing in the rock face and continued their journey that way."

"Dandy, you are a most invaluable man," Macalister cried in delight. "I really believe that with you and the Professor and the Captain, and maybe Sam, Mike, Frenchy, and Charlie, I could safely go through London or Glasgow."

Macalister was a diplomatist of the highest order. He feared no man, never took personal risk into account, and stuck at nothing, yet he never hurt any man's feelings by an unkind word, and always gave praise freely where it was deserved. His comrades at times said many hard words to him, and apparently forgot any service he had been to them, but he never showed anger, indeed, he never felt inclined to do so. He knew that all trusted him implicitly, and that any one of them would give his life for him, and he also knew that they loved fun, and *thought* they got it at his expense. With grim Scotch humour he allowed them to believe what they liked, and often appeared to be sublimely indifferent to what they thought an excellent joke. He knew all the time, however, but the pretence of absence of humour was *his* joke in retaliation.

Dandy at once climbed the tree and crawled out on a branch which stretched towards the wall of rock. He found what he expected—a ledge upon which he could stand ; and soon after all stood beside him, although the poor Professor had to be assisted up the smooth tree-trunk. He was not used to such work, even though he was an ornithologist.

Following Dandy, the men skirted the ledge in single file until it turned into a cleft in the rocks and suddenly led right into a hole large enough to allow a man to pass into, walking upright. The men now became greatly interested, and when after a brief search near the mouth of the hole Macalister found some torches their excitement increased. They now knew that they were not on the trail of something which would end without result. They lit several torches and proceeded along the cavernous passage, which seemed to lead right into the heart of the mountain. The road was easy at first, and they ran along over the damp and rough, rocky floor for a considerable distance before they noticed that the roof had now receded far into the darkness above their heads. They next became conscious that a cold draught was playing through the cavern, and then the walls suddenly fell away into space and they were standing in a mighty cave, the confines of which they could not see, although their torches illuminated the darkness to a considerable extent. Dandy

could go no farther as leader, so Macalister took his place and the onward march was resumed. Without hesitation he forced ahead, and the pace soon became so rapid that Vic Charlie asked from the rear if Macalister were afraid his dinner was being spoiled ; Charlie himself was still weak from the effects of the fight on the bridge.

“ We’re no’ very far away now,” the Scot called back reassuringly ; “ but watch your feet ; we’re coming into rough country.”

His advice came none too soon, for the cavern floor suddenly became broken up to a considerable extent. Great pools of ice-cold water intercepted the course, and sometimes a yawning chasm would open beneath their feet. The track of the warriors had long ago been lost on the hard ground, but Macalister steered with an instinct that seemed to be unerring. At length, after hours of arduous toil, in which they swam underground rivers, climbed precipices, leaped ravines, and struggled through narrow passages, Dandy heard the strange noise of the waterfall he knew so well. How far they had travelled he had no idea, but he was very tired, which, considering that he had not slept for three nights, was not very surprising. He did not yield, however, and by help from the Captain and Frenchy kept up with the others. Dandy was a hero with all ; he was a youth only in years ; his actions had shown him to be as good a man as was in the company, and besides, he was an excellent cook.

They passed the great cascade, but Macalister did not point out the evidences lying around that gold-miners had been working there, and Dandy made no comment. The climb upwards to the outlet was negotiated after much trouble, for all were tired out, and Big Sam and Irish Mike were beginning to complain that Macalister didn't know where he was going. But, however much that idea might have been true at one part of the journey it certainly was erroneous now, and Macalister speedily proved it to be so when he led them out under the overhanging scrub which hid the cave mouth. There could be no mistaking the fresh air of heaven even although it was hot and in many ways unpleasant, and all said as much as they drank it in before crawling through to the hollow. Eventually they stood outside and marvelled at the extent of the journey they had come through the great mountain. It was still dark, and the moon was just setting over the top of the ridge. Through the trees they could see their old camp, the white packs of their late carriers gleaming conspicuously where they had been left.

"Come on, boys," cried Vic Charlie, "there's a race left in me yet. I'll bet a sixpence I'll be in the old camp first."

"You'd better look out for the warrior fellows, Charlie, if you leave this crowd behind," Macalister advised.

"I see them," whispered the Captain, "they are

sleeping beside our bark shade. We'll catch them nicely."

"It's blamed funny for Tugeris to be caught sleeping," said Big Sam ; " but after all, they are only men."

Plans were formed instantly, and, creeping towards the old camp silently, the prospectors suddenly leaped upon the sleeping forms. There was a yell, then more yells, and then a selection of very choice English burst upon the morning air.

Macalister arose from his man, and simultaneously, but with much comment, his comrades also let go their grips. "Get up, Flash Harry!" said Macalister grimly. "Are you no' ashamed to be sleeping so late on a beautiful morning like this? And you, too, crinkled Peter!"

"An' my word! me too; God save the King! Hims vera mighty glad to see old Macalister again if hims not hims ghost," cried a familiar voice from among some scrub near.

"Good-morning, Fat Head," said the Captain. "How do you do, Flash Harry. I see you have quite a company with you. Is it near your usual breakfast hour?"

Flash Harry got up and felt his throat tenderly, and his companions also got on their feet, but not silently!

"For cooked prospectors you look a remarkably healthy lot of fellows," Harry remarked quietly. "But I'm powerfully glad to see you."

CHAPTER XIV

“ I AM THE WARDEN ! ”

THE sun was up, and under the skilful hands of the cooks of both parties, breakfast was being prepared. They were now fourteen strong and fully armed with Winchester rifles, and they thought themselves equal to any enemy that might come along. In addition, there were the carriers of both parties, but no reliance could be placed on them, although Flash Harry's men were loud in their praises of Fat Head. All the men knew each other well, for they had all been mates down in Esperance Valley workings, and already they had told each other their various experiences, and of the daring of Macalister, Dandy, and the Professor. But the three last named and the Captain were wonderfully silent. Dandy, with the assistance of Fat Head, was trying to wash his skin white again, Vic Charlie insisting on taking his place as chief cook for the time ; but the other three had drawn apart and were discussing matters among themselves. Flash Harry himself, too, stood alone. He felt he was not wanted in the company of the other three. Perhaps, after Mac-

alister, he was the best-known man in New Guinea. He was a reckless, happy-go-lucky sort of man, who had been everywhere, from Cape Town to Callao and from Dawson City to Dunedin. He had followed the "red flag" (gold rushes) all over the world, had tried pearling on the north-west coast of Australia, sought for diamonds in Brazil, traded in the South Seas, and gone whaling in the Antarctic. Doubtless he had tried many other things, but as he never spoke of himself it was only when some new-comer recognised in him the daring adventurer he had met before and told what he knew of him that the stories of his doings got about. Most people found him a decent fellow, and certainly any poor wanderer who struck his camp was always welcomed and helped in every way possible to get on his feet again. Macalister and he had never been exactly friends, but they respected each other because each knew more of the past of the other than they told. They had met in various parts of the world, had wished each other good luck, and separated; they could not pull together, it seemed, because Flash Harry was impulsive and reckless, and Macalister was *supposed* to be slower and much given to the practice of what he termed strategy. Yet Macalister knew Harry was not foolishly reckless, and Harry knew that he who would get in ahead of Macalister would have to rise very early indeed.

Finally Harry moved over to the three men.

"I don't wish to intrude, Macalister," he said, "but I have the impression that I have met your native friend under different conditions. In fact, he was white-skinned then, and I thought he had pegged out."

"Oh, no, Mr. Flash Harry," the Professor replied coldly, "I managed to get away all right, but in the adventures in which I have been taking part these last few days I have found a black skin decidedly more convenient than a white."

"So it is you, Professor," said Harry. "I've been trying to place you this last half-hour. I'm glad you are still on top. But what is wrong with you, Macalister? and you, Captain? We were good enough friends as far as I knew when we last met——"

"Flash Harry," began Macalister, in response to a sign from the Captain, "I'll judge no man until I hear what he has to say for himself. Now if you volunteer any information we'll not harp back on the same tune, seeing you have abandoned your own Esperance Valley claims by coming here."

"What are you driving at, old man? I know you've got hold of some idea, but may I be paralysed if I can get the hang of it." Flash Harry adjusted his eye-glasses and came closer. His slightly nasal accent had almost entirely left him, sure sign that Harry was dangerously cool. He was a handsome man, and probably about forty years of age.

"What did you come here for?" persisted the Scot, looking Harry straight in the face.

"Gold, but I trusted to your party to find it."

"Then I apologise," said Mac, "and we'll have breakfast together now. I wronged you: for if you came here expecting to find gold it shows you have no hand in the other scheme."

"Look here, Mac; we're not children; we've roughed it a bit throughout this weary world, and we know how easily mistakes arise. If I have given you any cause for complaint against me, I'm sorry. My mates and I came here by forced marches because we met Fat Head and his boys, who told us you were in trouble. We are all sorry if we have intruded, but as half Esperance Valley population will be here by to-morrow you surely didn't expect to keep the place to yourselves?"

"What place? You can have this crater hollow for any objections we'll make; there is no gold here that I can see, and as you were here before, yourself, you ought to know that."

"I know that I couldn't find any trace of gold, Macalister, but as it was you yourself who told me there was gold here, I naturally concluded that you had not given me the exact position, and when you set out from Esperance Valley camp I came after you to see where the stuff really was."

"But we came ourselves because we heard of the great strike reported by a party who were

nearly exterminated up here," cried the Captain. "We thought it was your men who spread the story because we knew you had been here with an expedition."

"And my fellows thought it was Macalister who set the yarn going because we knew he had been here before."

"Begorrah ! this is better than any fun with the Tugeris," put in a well-known voice, and the quartet suddenly realised that all the men had quietly gathered round.

"But didn't you report finding gold to the people who sent you to look for it?" Dandy asked.

"I haven't had the honour of being introduced to you, sir," Flash Harry answered coldly.

"I beg your pardon," said Dandy, flushing. "I am——"

"Dandy Dick, the cook," Macalister interrupted, "my friend and comrade, and as good a man as ever drew breath."

"And only a kid, too," added Big Sam. "But my word ! if Dandy ever gets into trouble, Big Sam will be in it too until he gets out."

"And poor old Vic Charlie won't be far away," sang out that gentleman. Mike and Frenchy also added words signifying that they would make short work of Dandy's enemies, and didn't mind when they appeared.

They spoke aggressively, but Flash Harry broke them off by saying : "Young man, I apologise ;

I thought you were another of those smart young men just out from the Old Country, and I—well, I'm sorry I was rude. I'm Flash Harry, a person who is no good to himself or anybody else. I'm glad to meet a fellow who has so many friends I know, but I'm surprised to find that a boy like you has survived the many fevers of this benighted country."

"Oh, I'm older than I look," said Dandy, "and, you know, the fever may get me any time. But now that we know each other would you mind answering the question I put to you: Did you report to your people that you had found gold?"

"No," Flash Harry thundered. "I told them there was more gold in the teeth of the London man for whom I was working than I had found up here. They tried to make me say differently, but I wouldn't; Flash Harry may be all that is bad, but he doesn't lie, for personal benefit, anyway."

"I understand now," said Macalister. "You were as much surprised as we were when you heard the reports?"

"More so, I should fancy. I thought they were true and that you originated them. Didn't you, Macalister?"

"No, I told no man but yourself that I knew gold existed in this part of the world, and knowing you found none, I thought the whole scheme was a dodge of your people to make the miners clear out from Esperance Valley and then leave their

claims to whoever might re-peg them. Harry, there's my hand ; and now we'll have breakfast."

"And high time," said Vic Charlie. "It has been ready this last half-year. What do we need to care about gold? We have our own claims in Esperance Valley to go back to, and they are good enough for men who are not gluttons on the yellow stuff." His words were applauded by all, and during the next half-hour breakfast only was discussed.

But there were still many points that puzzled Macalister and the Captain, and after the meal was over, at their request, Flash Harry explained matters as far as he knew. "You see, boys," he began, "after I finished with that unsuccessful gold-hunting trip I came back to Esperance Valley and joined the mates I have now. When the reports came in about the marvellous strike up this way they were all for starting at once, but I applied the brake until you people set out. That very night a crowd of new chums came up to Esperance Valley, and among them was an old friend of mine who had been up here with me. By some means or other he had been made deputy Warden, and he was loaded with all the usual proclamations concerning the welfare of the natives, and all the rest of that rot. I called the boys together to meet him, but you fellows had already cleared out, and when I heard that you had left for Tugeriland, my mates and I came after you, they

thinking that if you did know where the gold was you wouldn't object to your old mates getting a share, and I knowing that without strong support you would be a dinner for the Tugeris soon after they heard of your presence. We came up the river and had trouble with that old renegade Beefsteak, who had somehow become the chief of a warrior tribe—Papangis, I think they were—and when we got square with his people we met Fat Head and your other carriers making tracks for Esperance Valley on a non-stop run. They told us that you had been taken prisoners, so we came on through the night, intending to follow up your tracks and rescue you. That's our story, boys, but most of the Esperance Valley fellows will be rolling in any time now if Beefsteak hasn't met them in small parties. I'm glad you are all right, but I'm sorry the boys are all coming here for nothing. If I ever find out who started the yarn of the mountain of gold I guess times will be lively for some one."

"You can't imagine any reason for any one spreading such a story?" asked Dandy. "I understand that only your previous party and Macalister were ever here before, and fancy, therefore, seeing the exact position of this hollow was given in the reports, the information must have come directly from some people who knew of your expeditions."

"No, I can't imagine how any people could

gain by sending fellows up here," Flash Harry answered thoughtfully, "unless they mean to boom Papua so as to float some rubber companies more easily. But even that reason doesn't account for so many papers being sent to Esperance Valley. We should have known of the discovery first, and anyway, there are no people among the miners of an investing disposition. The whole thing seems to be a journalistic invention, and we've been taken in badly."

"You couldn't believe it possible, I suppose," the Captain said, "that the real object was to make Esperance Valley miners leave their fairly good claims to come here? The claims, according to the mining law, would be considered abandoned if no exemption had been granted by the Warden, and at the time we left there was no Warden——"

"You mean any other fellows could jump all the vacant claims?" put in Crinkled Peter, while Flash Harry seemed to be considering some idea which had just struck him.

"By Christmas! you've struck it, Captain," Harry suddenly exclaimed. "It is a game, after all, and we've been fooled. That company-promoter who sent me up here has designed the whole thing. He wanted gold-bearing country for his people in London and now he'll have got it in Esperance Valley. Come on, boys, we'll go back and fight the thing out; we'll take our old claims

back by force, and every man who cannot prove he's not working for any company we'll——"

"You're excited, Harry, my man," said Macalister. "Maybe things will turn out no' so badly for us after all."

"I don't see what there is to worry about," Dandy added. "The Warden is supreme, is he not? He'll order all our claims to be restored when he knows the circumstances under which they were abandoned?"

"The Warden!" laughed Harry contemptuously. "Do you think the fellow will ever see Esperance Valley. He's sent a deputy who knows as much about handling free white men as Fat Head there. The man appointed Resident Magistrate, my boy, will most probably never see more of Papua than he can see from his hotel window in Samarai. He'll send up plenty of laws and regulations though, and he'll see that the miners abide by them, through his deputy."

"Let's hunt him up and hang him," suggested Brisbane Charlie, one of Flash Harry's party. "Wardens are all improved by hanging——"

"I am afraid hanging the Warden will not help us much," the Captain said musingly. "All the same, I think the present one is not giving us a fair deal. A man who through age or infirmity cannot visit the fields over which he is more than king shouldn't be allowed to get that most important position."

"Is the new Warden an old man?" Dandy asked; "and can his deputy not do all the work required of him?"

"No one has seen the fellow yet," Flash Harry replied, "but it is supposed that he is some old fossil the Government down in Australia had to find a job for. His deputy, too, seems to think prospectors are soldiers, although I know he is a decent fellow in other ways, for he was a mate of mine. He'll stick to the written law, and allow for nothing, and, of course, one can't blame him, seeing he has got to carry out the orders of some silly old woman of a man who most likely never saw a native in his life."

"But maybe he is a half-decent fellow, after all, and despite his ignorance open to listen to reason?" put in Dandy.

"We'll see when we get back to Esperance Valley," said Flash Harry. "We'll very soon give his deputy all he wants—— Hullo! Here are a lot of the boys coming now. My word, they are in a hurry too!"

"Anything for a quiet life," Macalister muttered. He had been unusually silent himself of late, and well his comrades knew the reason. A dozen men had suddenly appeared over the ridge above, and were now running down towards the camp in great excitement. Very soon they reached the silent but surprised men who had arrived earlier, and then all began talking at once.

"The Tugeris are up!" cried one. "And Beefsteak is hurrying to join them."

"That's ancient history, Nuggety Bill," Big Sam laughed. "Are there any more Esperance Valley boys coming?"

"No, the rest won't leave their claims. They don't believe the story, and they say they will obey the Warden's orders——"

"Quite right," said Macalister. "The law should be kept at all costs; they are vera sensible men——"

"Oh shut up, Macalister!" roared another man. "You've broken the blamed law yourself by coming here. Where is the place where the nuggets are as big as dampers?"

"Not here, not here, my child," Big Sam warbled. "You'd better give up looking for the evil stuff, Copper-nosed Tom. Gold is a delusion and a snare, and—— Oh, I forgot, boys. Roll up and help yourselves to whatever my hungry mates haven't eaten."

"But the gold!" cried several men. "Where is it?"

"There isn't any gold," growled Crinkled Peter. "We've been sold, and now our old claims will be jumped as well."

"What! no gold?" howled the new-comers. Clearly they did not believe the statement.

"Not a trace," Flash Harry answered. "I'm glad there's more than my little crowd been fooled. We'll go back now."

"I don't think so," put in an old miner. "Beefsteak is behind us, with most of the fighting tribes of the country at his back, and by this time he'll have joined the Tugeris. We'll not go back, Flash Harry, unless we can make our journey in ghost form. Some of Beefsteak's men have rifles, and you can go your last cent that they can use them."

"Well, so can we," said Flash Harry. "There are twenty-six white miners here—if two of us would wash half decently—and a score of carrier-boys. We're strong enough to tackle anything."

"No, we're not," Macalister observed. "Our fellows know something about the Tugeris, and in my opinion (and I have only recently resigned from an official position among them which qualifies me to speak) they could eat us all themselves though we were three times stronger than we are. Besides, we must not cause bloodshed. We have no right here, and the Warden would receive confirmation of the correctness of his judgment in closing this country to prospectors."

"Then are we to sit down and make ourselves as appetising as we can?" asked Brisbane Charlie sarcastically.

"Boys, we mustn't break the law," one of the last arrivals added in mockery of Macalister's tones. "You know how it would break the poor dear old Warden's heart if a frizzy-haired nigger got hurt, or suffered from indigestion through

eating us. Let us walk into the fire and cook ourselves so as to save them all trouble."

The men laughed, but the old miner checked them with the words: "Don't be greater fools than you can help, boys. Macalister is right in saying we must not start trouble; you should have noticed he said nothing against defending ourselves if attacked."

"If that nigger with his hair frizzled the wrong way is Macalister I'll say no more," one of the men said. "He'll have some strategy up where his sleeve should be that will even bring gold to this place if he moves his arm."

"Or opens his mouth," suggested Crinkled Peter. "Macalister never speaks without saying something."

"And what I'm going to say now is that I'm vera sleepy and so are my two comrades, the black Professor here and Dandy. If you fellows will start building a wee fort and generally keep watch against surprise, I'll do another kind of surprising trick after a few hours' sleep. Even a crocodile-priest among the Tugeris gets played out at times, and I'm speaking for the elephant and other priests, too."

Here the Captain said a few words to Flash Harry and that gentleman at once cried:—

'Come on, boys, do as Macalister says. Half a dozen of you go up on top, after you get a feed, and watch, and the rest of us will build a fort.

We'll receive Beefsteak and the Tugeris and all comers at home when they do come."

"If I could find my umbrella," cried the Professor, "I might be able to enlist the people of the nearest village on our behalf."

"No, you couldn't, old man," one of the men replied. "The people of the village down outside gave us a bad time, I can tell you. Beefsteak is their chief now; it seems their own mamoose ran away without giving notice."

"Dear me, is that so?" the Professor said, and relapsed into a thoughtful silence which lasted until he fell asleep, and by that time Macalister and Dandy were also oblivious to their surroundings. They were utterly exhausted, and no wonder!

It was late in the afternoon when Macalister awoke, and leaving his two comrades still sleeping under the bark shade, he went out to take once more an interest in affairs. And all were glad to see him; they would have awakened him earlier had not the Captain given it as an order, which his own men backed, that he was not to be disturbed unless the hollow was actually in possession of the enemy. And it nearly was when the fast-thinking but cautious Scot walked out and lit a cigar Flash Harry offered him. A fort had been built in a position almost impregnable, and all the stores had been placed inside; but the guards on the ridge of the crater now comprised nearly all the men, the others, although the Captain did not

take it upon himself to explain the reason, being all stationed near the bottom of the valley on some pretext. Irish Mike and Frenchy knew the tunnel exit, however, and they were in command.

The mountain hollow was now actually surrounded by warriors. They had been creeping up all day, taking advantage of every piece of cover as skilfully as the best trained European troops ; they never exposed themselves ; they knew the white men could shoot straight, and they had no desire to be the victims of their magic. And they also had the white man's fire magic too, only they didn't know exactly how to employ it. They had killed many a wandering prospector and his rifle became a most treasured possession, but a rifle without ammunition is not nearly so useful as a club in the hands of a very strong man. The men on the ridge watched and waited ; they knew there was no hope of breaking through the horde that cut off the way back to Esperance Valley, but they also thought they could prevent the warriors coming to much closer quarters as the zone near the top of the hill was bare of cover of any kind. The present attackers were a collection of warrior tribes under the notorious Beefsteak, but well all knew that if that person succeeded in inducing the Tugeris to make common cause with him the question of their ever seeing Esperance Valley was extremely doubtful. But they now had the fort and plenty of stores, and without doubt Macalister

could invent some scheme which would put matters in a different light before long, so meanwhile they kept their Winchesters full and waited.

Macalister walked round and saw how affairs stood, and after ordering the guards with the assistant carrier-boys to build fires on the summit, he returned to the fort and asked when supper would be ready. On being told that all available men with any knowledge of cooking were preparing that meal at the moment, he went back to the bark erection and fell asleep again, only getting up when the meal was spread out. Dandy and the Professor were now awake and said they felt fit for anything, so, dining as coolly as if they were in the heart of Sydney or Melbourne, the men laughed and talked and vented their several opinions as to what they would do with the Warden if ever he fell into their hands. The guards, too, had been called in, for the more experienced prospectors knew that no warriors, except the far-famed Tugeris, would venture an attack by night unless they were absolutely certain of the result, which the present enemy could not be, or they would have rushed the place earlier. Two men only with some boys kept watch above, and saw that the fires were always blazing. Every couple of hours these men were relieved by a fresh party, but down in the hollow, sitting outside the curiously constructed fort, the other members of the camp sang, told stories, and generally enter-

tained each other until the Captain announced it was time all turned in.

All the time, however, Macalister kept an eye on the slopes farther down, and his own comrades, without saying anything to the others—they had become wonderfully thoughtful of late—also detached themselves in turns, and mounted guard in the vicinity of the clump of vegetation which hid the tunnel entrance.

“Macalister has been mighty quiet to-night,” said one of the men, yawning, as he rose to take his turn up above. “I reckon he’s broken-hearted because we’ve got no gold. He used to be able to tell some rattling good yarns down in Esperance.”

“You get out to your post, Ugly Bob,” Macalister answered, “and see that Beefsteak’s warriors don’t come up while you are sleeping. While you are away I’ll give the boys an address on the uselessness of gold, especially when surrounded by Beefsteak’s men and the Tugeris.”

“Thank goodness I don’t have to hear it!” cried Ugly Bob, moving off. “I’d rather be a dinner for Beefsteak than have to listen to ‘Why we Haven’t Struck Gold’ as told by Macalister. Good-night, boys; I’ll be back in a couple of hours, just when Macalister will be finishing, I expect.”

“Get out, then, quick and lively, or I’ll help you,” roared Big Sam, who, however much he might appear to run against Macalister at times,

would certainly not allow outsiders to try the same game. Vic Charlie also advised Ugly Bob to clear out quickly if he didn't wish to qualify for a tombstone, and the ugly one went without further parley.

But he had struck the mark fairly accurately when he said he would be back in time to hear the *end* of Macalister's speech. He was. He didn't hear Mac's story, but he was just in time to listen to the peroration, and that was wonderfully to the point. "Therefore," Macalister was concluding, "although you fellows all came back here to find gold and have found none, it is vera near us at this moment all the same. In fact, Dandy's Bonanza is worth Esperance Valley many times over, and as I have got his consent by sign, while talking, to invite you all to have a share in it, I'll have much pleasure in taking you to the spot the moment we get free from our present troubles. Meanwhile, I agree with the Captain that it is high time all honest prospectors were turned in."

But the men didn't turn in for a long time. They discussed Macalister's words, consigned Beefsteak, his men, and the Tugeris to regions hotter than Papua, and finally began to inquire of each other how Dandy had become such a great personage and they had never heard of him previously.

All through the night the guards relieved each other, but when daylight came it was evident that some changes had occurred in the ranks of the

attacking warriors. They had retreated far down the hillside and seemingly were holding a council of war. Apparently something had gone wrong in their plans.

But a great commotion now arose among the white men. Dandy was missing, and no answer came to the shouts of his comrades, which could be heard easily all over the hollow. Fat Head said he had heard some light-footed person whom he had concluded was Dandy leave the camp before sundown and proceed towards the bottom of the hollow, and at his words Macalister became calm again, much to the surprise of all.

"We'll have breakfast, lads," he said, "and then we'll await Dandy's return. He's gone to prepare things for you in that Aladdin's cave I told you about last night."

"But he shouldn't have left camp without telling some one," Flash Harry complained. "We've plenty of trouble on hand at present without having to look for a wandered kid."

"Don't you think Dandy will get wandered," Big Sam said. "He's as cute a cook as ever I knew."

"Roll up for breakfast," shouted Vic Charlie just then. "There's plenty of it, and you fellows need a feed if you're to fight Beefsteak to-day."

"We'll have to fight more than Beefsteak," put in the oldest miner of the latest arrivals. "During my two hours on guard last night I heard the wireless messages flying about as thick as mosquitoes



DANDY SUDDENLY APPEARED FROM THE SCRUB

between Beefsteak's fellows and the Tugeris. I didn't say anything when I came in because I knew there could be no danger until now, but all the same, the messages said that the Tugeris had set out in force to assist Beefsteak and would attack us by a way known only to them."

Macalister, the Captain, and the original comrades sprang to their feet and rushed for their rifles. "Why in blazes didn't you say that before?" Big Sam roared. "The kid is out himself meeting them. Come on, boys——"

"Yes," Macalister wailed, "and it's my fault for not telling everything last night. The gold I told you about, boys, is in the cavern he's gone into, and that same way is the Tugeris' short cut——"

"Here he comes!" yelled Frenchy, already halfway down the hollow. "He is safe; he is—— oh! see who is with him. Speak, Macalistaire! Vat shall we do?"

Dandy had suddenly appeared from the scrub lower down, in the midst of half a dozen powerful and fierce-looking Tugeris. He walked with them unconcernedly towards the camp, and the prospectors were paralysed. Were they dreaming? Did they actually see Tugeri warriors in the hollow? Whence had they come? What did it all mean? Clearly they had been caught napping and now they would have to pay the penalty.

"I say, boys," cried Dandy as he saw his comrades, "I'm in a little bit of trouble——"

"I should say a big bit," groaned some one, "and we'll be in it too, presently."

"I cannot speak the Tugeris' language," Dandy went on, "and the gentlemen who are my companions and I have a lot of matters to arrange. May I ask your assistance, Captain?"

The Captain, Macalister, and most of the men were round him before he finished speaking.

"Explain, laddie!" cried Macalister, while the Captain at once began talking with the calm and dignified warriors. "What does this mean? Have these fellows come to propose terms?"

"It means that I have done what you told me you were going to do, Mac, if necessary. I am now mamoose of the Tugeris!"

"What!" yelled all, not believing their ears.

"You see, I came down to have a look at our gold show, and while there saw the Tugeris coming through to attack us in the rear. I recognised Beefsteak among them, but he didn't appear to be receiving very much attention. At the pool, however, he seemed to become very angry over some point of etiquette, and before I knew anything more a fight for the chieftainship was going on. Well, he's in the pool now. But I was caught, for I had gone boldly among the warriors, and to put it briefly, I challenged the champion. He was a strong man, a clever man, and a brave man, but, according to rule, I believe, we fought unarmed, and he knew nothing of jiu-jitsu. He will

now lead the Tugeris *against* Beefsteak's warriors unless they disperse, and will enter into any friendly arrangements with prospectors. If he doesn't I will do it for him."

The men were absolutely silent. They could not believe what they had heard, and yet there was Dandy in front of them, stripped as he had fought, and displaying a development of muscle greater than that of any of the party except, perhaps, Macalister, and the chief men of the untamable Tugeri head-hunters standing adoringly around him.

"Who are you?" at length Flash Harry burst out. "I've seen you before somewhere, and you are not a camp cook!"

"And he's not the kid he looks either!" cried Vic Charlie. "He's all bone and muscle!"

"Anyway," said Macalister, and his voice was now free from all traces of anxiety, "he's finished our troubles without bloodshed; youth is more developed now, boys, than it was in our days, and Dandy, boy though he is in years, is equal to the best man in Papua in either brains, physical powers, or skill. Hurrah for Dandy, boys, the hero of New Guinea, and as good a fellow as ever drew trigger!"

"And the best cook I know," added Vic Charlie.

"Yes, men, it is all true," cried the Captain. "These native gentlemen assure me that Dandy is now their chief. They have done away with their

priests and wish to be friendly towards the white men ; they are the Tugeri councillors——”

“ Aye, I ken that much,” muttered Macalister grimly. “ Some o’ them carry bruises I gave them, and I see Irish Mike’s trade mark on that fellow on the far left, while the warrior who has such a lot to say was dealt very severely with by the Professor. I’m a bit sorry to hear the Tugeri have dispensed with their priests, but after all, maybe it is better so ; the crocodile-priest, the elephant, and the bird-fellows were vera harmful to the people while they reigned—— What is it, Fat Head ? ”

“ Hims come to say that all the black niggers outside have cleared out. God save the King ! ” announced the chief carrier. “ They all run like thunder and lightning, as if they no’ tink this place any good for them.”

“ Frenchy,” said Macalister, “ you might go and give Fat Head a lump o’ sugar from our stores ; his news is vera comforting.”

“ By Jupiter ! the thunder and lightning and rain are coming anyway, boys,” cried Flash Harry ; “ we’ll be drowned out directly.”

“ No, we won’t,” Macalister replied. “ Dandy’s Bonanza is well protected, and it will provide gold for all.”

“ Then we’re not going back to Esperance Valley ? ” asked one of the men.

“ Certainly not,” the Captain answered.

"Dandy's Bonanza, Macalister has just said, will give us all the gold we want. And as we cannot hold claims in two places we can't object even if the Warden allows our old claims to be jumped by the gang. Dandy is the Tugeri mamoose, too, and if we are free to prospect the Tugeri country I fancy we'll find more gold than we'll know how to use."

"Then another three cheers for Dandy, boys," cried Flash Harry, "and then we'll have breakfast and get to work. He has given us gold, saved us from breaking the law of the Australian Commonwealth, and even been the means of keeping us straight with the old, antiquated specimen we've got for a Warden."

When the cheering ceased sufficiently to enable Dandy to speak he said: "Gentlemen, I do not deserve your kind words. Macalister is the man who has done everything, and he deserves all credit. The Captain, too, is a man in a million, and all my comrades and the Professor have done marvels."

"We know they are all good fellows," cried the old miner, "but you are the King of New Guinea. We'll make you Warden when we go back, even if we have to hang the old one."

"Don't do that, please," Dandy said awkwardly; "perhaps he is a half-decent fellow after all."

"It doesn't matter," shouted the men, "we'll have no Warden but you!"

"And we'll fight for you as Warden against the

whole blamed world," cried Big Sam. "You are the finest fellow I know, and the best cook. We'll hunt the old beggar who is Warden now out of the country."

"We will!" roared all.

"I'd much rather you didn't, boys," said Dandy deprecatingly. "You see, I hate to mention it, but—*I am the Warden!*"

THE END.

